

THE LANGUAGE OF JOHANNES BRAHMS'S THEME AND VARIATION:  
A STUDY OF HIS CHAMBER WORKS FOR STRINGS

by

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The variation movements of Johannes Brahms portray a continuous development of his musical discourse. Regarding variation form, he advocated for formal unity and the important role of the bass throughout his letters. In his music, he invented a language of theme and variation capable of creating new structures through old forms. The present analysis studies Brahms's approach to theme and variation through four representative movements from his chamber works for strings: Op. 18/ii, Op. 36/iii, Op. 67/iv, and Op. 111/i. Comparing these movements reveals a continuous development of his musical rhetoric in the variation genre. By challenging the historic aesthetics of variation technique through a progressive release of structure, Brahms establishes a discursive, goal-directed language within a recurring framework. He thus asserts his individual voice within a traditional form, contributing to the genre of theme and variation with an ongoing, teleological dialogue.



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by

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The variation movements of Johannes Brahms portray a developing approach to musical rhetoric through a reconciliation of disparate musical styles. As a compositional form, theme and variation generally features elements of recursion within a succession of discreet units. The units are often combined through a loose, unifying scheme, yet the element of recursion typically remains prominent. In Brahms's approach to theme and variation, he develops a style that is both recursive and discursive, or goal-directed. In this way, he gradually emphasizes the broader formal scheme above the recursive nature of variation form. Within this design, Brahms employs a language of variation that reconciles the dichotomy of recursive and discursive tendencies. Consequently, he develops a unique dialect of variation while building upon the harmonic and formal vocabulary of his predecessors, merging traditional and innovative techniques within a singular musical language.

The language of Brahms's theme and variation is particularly evident in his chamber works for strings. Indeed, a comparative study of these variation movements reveals a continuous narrative in his approach to variation form. With each successive work, features of his style, as exhibited through the lens of his chamber music, emerge as landmarks in his more comprehensive compositional journey. In a broader context, these individual works are then incorporated into the ongoing theme and variation tradition, providing foundation for its development into the twentieth century.

This chapter will present an overview of the formal principle of theme and variation and its types, followed by a brief explanation regarding the content of the present study.

### I. THEME AND VARIATION AS A FORMAL PRINCIPLE

The history of theme and variation emerged from a natural process of stating a theme and consequently improvising on it.<sup>1</sup> When organized through a structural framework, these successive improvisations on the theme become consecutive variations based on the premises of embellishment,

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Fontaine, *Basic Formal Structure in Music* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), p. 94.

alteration, and development. Within variation form, certain elements remain constant as others undergo transformation. Classification of variation type is dependent on both the components that remain fixed and the degree of variance in the altered elements. In terms of the general variation principle, specific vocabulary can assist in discussing the essence and challenges of the genre. Scholars frequently apply these linguistic terms to music in describing its language and discourse: (1) the idea of *paratactic* versus *hypotactic* hearings of the variations, and (2) the combination of *recursive* and *discursive* rhetoric.

### ***Paratactic versus Hypotactic***

The terms *paratactic* and *hypotactic* stem from the Greek nouns *parataxis* and *hypotaxis*. The former describes individual clauses that are not joined by any subordinating or coordinating conjunctions.<sup>2</sup> *Para-* is the Greek prefix for *beside*, and *tax* refers to the *arrangement*, or organization, of the clauses.<sup>3</sup> In other words, in a literal definition, *parataxis* describes clauses existing beside one another. This parallels the idea of each distinct variation representing a closed and independent idea.

On the other hand, *hypotaxis* describes the combination of clauses through subordinating conjunctions, suggesting that the clauses function interdependently.<sup>4</sup> The Greek prefix *hypo-*, denoting *less*, or *below*, refers to the subordinating relationships between the clauses connected by conjunctions.<sup>5</sup> From a language standpoint, subordinate clauses relate to other clauses and cannot function apart from the whole.

The literary concept of *hypotaxis* is similar to Nicholas Marston's inquiries into an organic analysis that studies variations in their relationship to the entire musical work. In his analysis of the finale in Beethoven's Op. 74 String Quartet, Marston poses several insightful questions that the analyst should consider when approaching a work based on theme and variation. He challenges the reader to consider "the problem of accounting for the variation set as a whole" rather than studying the theme and each

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<sup>2</sup>Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. "parataxis."

<sup>3</sup>Roger S. Crutchfield, *English Vocabulary Quick Reference: A Comprehensive Dictionary Arranged by Word Roots* (Leesburg: LexaDyne Publishing, Inc., 1999), p. 179.

<sup>4</sup>Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. "hypotaxis."

<sup>5</sup>Crutchfield, *English Vocabulary Quick Reference*, p. 110.

variation on individual terms.<sup>6</sup> Referring to Heinrich Schenker's analysis of the Brahms Handel Variations (op. 24), Marston observes that Schenker only identified the fundamental structure in each variation individually, rather than in the work as a whole.<sup>7</sup> He even suggests answering the question as to why the composer has arranged particular variations in a specified sequence, encouraging a broader perspective in the entire work or movement.<sup>8</sup>

An approach to theme and variation must therefore acknowledge the dual nature of discrete variation units found within an overarching narrative that connects one variation to another. Jeffrey Perry describes the challenges the composer faces in reconciling these two syntactical ideas in the whole of a musical work:

In composing such a whole, a way must be found to invite a coherent, hypotactic hearing of what is essentially a paratactic form, i.e. a form that consists of essentially equal parts. A composer also needs to make such a hypotactic hearing musically rewarding.<sup>9</sup>

Just as the composer of variation form must use techniques to relate the individual parts to one another, the listener and the analyst should also approach variation through not only a paratactic understanding, but also through a hypotactic lens that follows the relationships of one variation to the next as well as its significance to the whole work.

### ***Recursive versus Discursive***

The paratactic idea that Perry noted as synonymous with variation form describes the parts of theme and variation, in which traits of the theme recur in subsequent statements. In such respects, variations are *recursive* by nature. But can one assert that they are also *discursive*? Hypotaxis refers to the relationships between the variations, but discursive tendencies offer even further unity: a sense of goal-oriented development that supersedes the individual components of the form. Roman Ivanovitch acknowledges the combination of both recursive and discursive traits in variation genre:

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<sup>6</sup>Nicholas Marston, "Analysing Variations: The Finale of Beethoven's String Quartet op. 74," *Music Analysis* 8/3 (Oct. 1989): p. 303.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 304.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 303.

<sup>9</sup>Jeffrey Perry, "The Wanderer's Many Returns: Schubert's Variations Reconsidered," *The Journal of Musicology* 19/2 (Spring 2002): p. 386.

Variations sets are, after all, made up of small pieces, each of which in itself presents a small goal-directed course. Further, sets are often shaped by the composer—that is, given a sense of purpose or goal beyond their inevitable temporal directedness—through processes such as progressive rhythmic diminution, “mirroring,” or other kinds of systematic textural procedures. The incursion of directed shaping forces into the otherwise “purely” (or abstractly) recursive, paratactic environment of variation is thus a typical and oft-noted feature, part of the “practice” of the genre.<sup>10</sup>

Variations thus embody a musical rhetoric that can be described through both recurring elements of the theme and an overall directed motion toward a goal. A comprehensive understanding of the formal variation principle involves both methods of discourse, and against this background, the fixed and altered characteristics of the theme contribute in identifying the many approaches to variation form.

## II. VARIATION TYPES

Several musicologists and theorists have extensively surveyed the numerous methods of variation.<sup>11</sup> There are eight basic types of variation, generally classified by those characteristics that remain constant and those that change within the variations:<sup>12</sup> (1) Ostinato, (2) Constant-melody, (3) Constant-harmony, (4) Melodic-outline, (5) Formal-outline, (6) Characteristic, (7) Fantasy, and (8) Serial. The consequence in presenting specific categories of variation, however, may suggest that a single movement or work will embody all of the characteristics of a particular variation type. Elaine Sisman warns against this notion, showing that many variations share qualities from several of the variation types.<sup>13</sup> As a result, these categories should be interpreted as paradigms that describe the variety of compositional processes involved in any specific theme and variation. As the individual types are presented, refer to TABLE 1.1 as a succinct representation of the myriad of approaches to the variation genre.

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<sup>10</sup>Roman Ivanovitch, “Recursive/Discursive: Variation and Sonata in the Andante of Mozart’s String Quartet in F, K. 590,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 32/2 (Fall 2010): pp. 146–47.

<sup>11</sup>Although not an exhaustive list, see Elaine Sisman, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/29050> (accessed June 7, 2012); Timothy Jones, “variation form,” in *Oxford Companion to Music*, edited by Alison Latham, *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e7067> (accessed June 7, 2012); Robert U. Nelson, *The Technique of Variation: A Study of the Instrumental Variations from Antonio de Cabezón to Max Reger* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949).

<sup>12</sup>These types of variation have been designated by Elaine Sisman, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online*, and Timothy Jones, “variation form,” in *Oxford Companion to Music*.

<sup>13</sup>See Elaine Sisman, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*.

TABLE 1.1: Variation types<sup>14</sup>

	Ostinato	Constant		Outline		Characteristic	Fantasy	Serial
		Constant-melody	Constant-harmony	Melodic-outline	Formal-outline			
<b>i.e.</b>	ground bass, passacaglia, chaconne	cantus firmus variation (historic title)	<i>la folia</i> ; <i>romanesca</i> (specific types)	ornamental, embellishing variation			fantasia; free variation	
<b>Common Era(s)</b>	16 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> centuries	16 <sup>th</sup> , 17 <sup>th</sup> , and 18 <sup>th</sup> centuries	16 <sup>th</sup> , 17 <sup>th</sup> , and 18 <sup>th</sup> centuries	18 <sup>th</sup> and 19 <sup>th</sup> centuries	19 <sup>th</sup> century	19 <sup>th</sup> and 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries	19 <sup>th</sup> and 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries	20 <sup>th</sup> century
<b>Description</b>	Repeating bass line; continuous variations	Melody recurrent and constant	Basic harmonic progression constant	Prime notes from melody significantly embellished	Formal structure and basic periodicity constant	New characters result in each variation through stylistic invention	Changes in structure while melodic motives recur; sometimes programmatic	Variations on a 12-tone serial row
<b>Examples</b>	<b>J.S. Bach</b> Passacaglia in C minor BWV 582	<b>Haydn</b> “Emperor” String Quartet op. 76, No. 3/ii	<b>J.S. Bach</b> Goldberg Variations BWV 988	<b>Mozart</b> Variations on the theme, “Ah, vous dirai-je Maman” K. 265/300e	<b>Beethoven</b> Diabelli Variations op. 120	<b>Britten</b> Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge op. 10	<b>Elgar</b> “Enigma” Variations op. 36	<b>Webern</b> Symphony op. 21/ii

### Ostinato

Ostinato variations are continuous variations structured by a recurring bass line which provides the foundation of the theme and each succeeding variation.<sup>15</sup> Common names for this type include *basso ostinato*, *ground bass*, *chaconne*, and *passacaglia*.<sup>16</sup> Other elements are subject to change, such as melody, rhythm, texture, and harmony, as long as the bass remains the same. J.S. Bach’s Passacaglia in C minor, BWV 582 (SEE EXAMPLES 1.1A AND B) demonstrates this principle of a ground bass that governs the structure of the work, even with many alterations and embellishments, as in variation 19. Ostinato variations represent one of the oldest variation techniques, dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries.<sup>17</sup>

EXAMPLE 1.1A: J.S. Bach Passacaglia in C minor, BWV 582, Theme, mm. 1–8, organ pedals



<sup>14</sup>The names for the variation types in this chart and the following discussion are the terms used by Elaine Sisman in her article, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*.

<sup>15</sup>Elaine Sisman, “Variation,” in *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., edited by Don Michael Randel (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2003), p. 939.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Sisman, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*.

**EXAMPLE 1.1B:** J.S. Bach Passacaglia in C minor, BWV 582, variation 19  
Variation 19

*Constant-melody*

Constant-melody variations are united by a recurring melodic voice rather than a constant bass line. Historically, this variation derives its technique from the practice of a pre-existing melody, or *cantus firmus*.<sup>18</sup> While the principle of the *cantus firmus* was particularly common in the 13th through 16th centuries, later pieces draw upon the idea of this constant melody, as in the second movement of Haydn's String Quartet, "Emperor," op. 76, No. 3 (SEE EXAMPLES 1.2A AND B). Having an unchanged and recurrent melody despite more complex textures is the primary feature of the *cantus firmus*, or constant-melody, variation.<sup>19</sup> Here, Haydn inverts the texture by transferring the melody from the first violin throughout the other members of the quartet, as found in the cello in the second variation. Harmony, bass, and texture change while a recurrent melody binds the work together.

**EXAMPLE 1.2A:** Haydn "Emperor" String Quartet, op. 76, No. 3/ii, theme, mm. 1–4, violin 1

<sup>18</sup>Timothy Jones, "variation form," in *Oxford Companion to Music*, edited by Alison Latham, *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e7067> (accessed June 7, 2012).

<sup>19</sup>Floyd Grave and Margaret Grave, *The String Quartets of Joseph Haydn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 306–7.

**EXAMPLE 1.2B:** Haydn “Emperor” String Quartet, op. 76, No. 3/ii, var. 2, mm. 41–44  
Variation 2

***Constant-harmony***

On the other hand, in constant harmony variations, the melody and bass have freedom to change while the harmony remains. As in the ostinato variations, the theme in the constant harmony variation is not defined by the melody, and therefore, the latter is subject to change with each variation. Instead, the theme’s harmonic progression appears continually, providing cohesion in variations with changed meters, tempos, textures, and melody. Two specific types of constant harmony variations are the *folia* and the *romanesca*, based on the fixed harmonic progressions of these respective dances.<sup>20</sup> In J.S. Bach’s Goldberg Variations, BWV 988, Peter Williams remarks upon the absence of the theme’s “Aria” melody until the close of the work, in which the performer is directed to repeat it in its original form (*Aria da capo è fine*).<sup>21</sup> Hints of the Aria melody are significantly removed from the variations, but they are related through a recurrent harmonic progression (SEE EXAMPLES 1.3A AND B). In variation 18, for example, the meter has changed from triple to duple, and the texture appears similar to a trio sonata with a canon at the sixth in the upper voices, yet the harmony is the fixed element.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Sisman, “Variations,” in *New Grove Music. Oxford Music Online*.

<sup>21</sup>Peter Williams, *Bach: The Goldberg Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 35.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid*, p. 41.



**EXAMPLE 1.3A:** J.S. Bach Goldberg Variations, BWV 988, theme (Aria), mm. 1–8

G: I V<sup>6</sup> vii<sup>°6</sup>/V V <sup>7</sup> I<sup>6</sup> IV ii<sup>6</sup> V<sup>7</sup> I

**EXAMPLE 1.3B:** J.S. Bach Goldberg Variations, BWV 988, variation 18

Variation 18

G: I V vii<sup>°6</sup>/V V <sup>7</sup> I<sup>6</sup> IV ii<sup>6</sup> V <sup>7</sup> I

***Melodic-outline***

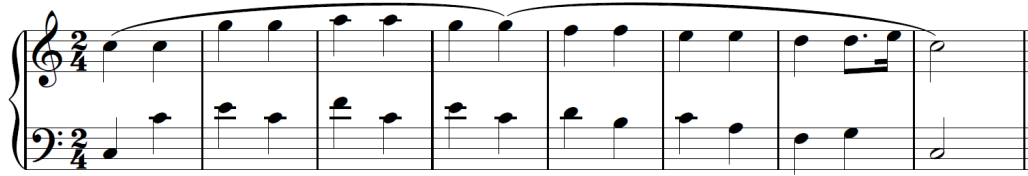
Melodic-outline variations are perhaps the types of pieces most readily identified as theme and variation works. Robert Nelson refers to these as *ornamental* variations because of the simple but increased figuration of the theme’s melody.<sup>23</sup> The figuration of the melody never reaches deep levels of structure, however, and as a result, the theme is continually apparent, even when primary melodic notes become embedded in the texture.<sup>24</sup> These variations are typically sectional and most common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>25</sup> Mozart’s Variations on a Theme, “Ah, vous dirai-je Maman,” K. 265/300e is an example of the melodic-outline, or ornamental, variation (SEE EXAMPLES 1.4A AND B). The scalar motion in variation 7 displays increased complexity, yet the principle notes of the melody still appear in their corresponding measures to the theme.

<sup>23</sup>Robert U. Nelson, *The Technique of Variation: A Study of the Instrumental Variations from Antonio de Cabezón to Max Reger* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), p. 5.

<sup>24</sup>Elaine Sisman, “Variation,” in *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, pp. 939–40.

<sup>25</sup>Jones, “variation form,” in *Oxford Companion to Music*. *Oxford Music Online*.

EXAMPLE 1.4A: Mozart Variations on the theme, “Ah, vous dirai-je Maman,” K. 265/300e, theme, mm. 1–8



EXAMPLE 1.4B: Mozart Variations on the theme, “Ah, vous dirai-je Maman,” K. 265/300e, variation 7  
Variation 7



### *Formal-outline*

Melody, harmony, and bass are all subject to change in the formal-outline variations. These variations are related to one another and to the theme by their similar periodicity through individual phrase structures and by the theme’s basic form.<sup>26</sup> The formal-outline variation is largely a nineteenth century concept, and faint hints of the theme’s harmony will occasionally appear at the beginnings and endings of variations.<sup>27</sup> Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations*, op. 120, portray the formal-outline technique (SEE EXAMPLES 1.5A AND B). While William Kinderman and Donald Francis Tovey have written on the unity created through motivic relationships between the theme and its variations,<sup>28</sup> the recurrent aspect of a unifying formal structure is also a prominent feature of the piece. The first half of the theme is presented in EXAMPLE 1.5A as a sixteen-bar phrase. In variation 16 (EXAMPLE 1.5B), while the notes and harmonies have undergone considerable changes, a sixteen-bar structure is preserved by a repeat of the first eight measures. In addition, despite extreme chromaticism, variation 16 opens in the tonic and ends on a half cadence at the close of the first phrase, parallel to the theme’s overall form.

<sup>26</sup>Sisman, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>For a more detailed discussion, see William Kinderman, *Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 76–83.

EXAMPLE 1.5A: Beethoven Diabelli Variations, op. 120, theme, mm. 1–16

EXAMPLE 1.5B: Beethoven Diabelli Variations, op. 120, variation 16

Variation 16

*Characteristic*

The term *characteristic* describes an aesthetic quality: a portrayal of new characters through each variation. Elaine Sisman describes this variation method as an approach that results from “individual members [taking] on the character of different dance pieces, national styles, or programmatic associations.”<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Britten’s *Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge*, op. 10, represents new characters formed through both dance associations and nationalistic styles (SEE EXAMPLES 1.6A AND B). The theme (EXAMPLE 1.6A) is a verbatim restatement from the first violin part of Frank Bridge’s *Second Idyll* for string quartet.<sup>30</sup> Each variation is a separate movement with an individual title reflecting a specific dance and/or nationality (SEE EXAMPLE 1.6B).

<sup>29</sup>Sisman, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*.

<sup>30</sup>Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), p. 66.

**EXAMPLE 1.6A:** Britten Variations on a theme by Frank Bridge, op. 10, Introduction and Theme, mm. 12–45, vln. 1

Allegretto poco lento (♩ = 160-170)

12 Solo Violin 1  
*p con tenerezza* *mf*

25 *pp* *pp dolciss.* unis. arco

36 *mf* *pp* (Violas)

**EXAMPLE 1.6B:** Britten Variations on a theme by Frank Bridge, op. 10, Aria Italiana, mm. 8–19, vln. 1

8 *ff* *trm trm trm trm*

14 *cresc.* *f* *sf* *dim.* *p*

### Fantasy

Fantasy variations, also known as *free variations*, develop aspects of the theme's form.<sup>31</sup> The distinctive mark of the fantasy variation is the “structural looseness” in which the variations alter the theme's formal design and periodicity.<sup>32</sup> Robert Nelson explains that “the bond between variations and theme is now frequently a theme motive rather than the theme in its entirety.”<sup>33</sup> Motivic figures from the theme therefore become the connective tissue in the piece as the variations depart significantly in structure and form. Programmatic tendencies are a common characteristic found in the fantasy variation.<sup>34</sup> Elgar's “Enigma” Variations, op. 36, demonstrate these qualities by retaining a recurring thematic motive despite extensive transformations to the structure through key signature, meter, and texture (SEE EXAMPLES 1.7A AND B). The initial six notes from the theme recur in variation 8, yet the rest of the

<sup>31</sup>Wallace Berry, *Form in Music: An examination of traditional techniques of musical form and their applications in historical and contemporary styles*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986), p. 285.

<sup>32</sup>Sisman, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*.

<sup>33</sup>Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, p. 6.

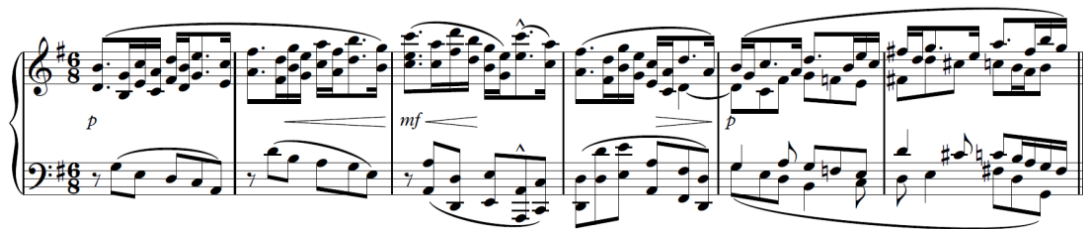
<sup>34</sup>Jones, “variation form,” in *Oxford Companion to Music*. *Oxford Music Online*.

melody and form break away in new directions. Julian Rushton describes Elgar’s “Enigma” Variations as “caprices on a theme,” pointing to their free, fantasia-like qualities.<sup>35</sup>

**EXAMPLE 1.7A:** Elgar “Enigma” Variations, op. 36, theme, mm. 1–6, piano reduction



**EXAMPLE 1.7B:** Elgar “Enigma” Variations, op. 36, variation 8, piano reduction  
Variation 8 (W.N.)



### *Serial*

Serial variations are based on a 12-tone serial row rather than a melody or a theme.<sup>36</sup> In many cases, the structure of the original theme is retained while the row is altered through development and embellishment.<sup>37</sup> The recurrent structural pattern separates the variation from other forms also built upon a serial row.<sup>38</sup> In the second movement of Webern’s *Symphony*, op. 21, Kathryn Bailey remarks upon the absence of a theme, or rather, a type of theme that is not treated in a traditional way (SEE EXAMPLE 1.8A).<sup>39</sup> The essence of the theme that influences the variations is the sequence of pitches in the twelve-tone row. Here, the row is entirely symmetrical, forming a palindrome based on interval relationships.<sup>40</sup> In the ensuing variations, Webern capitalizes on the symmetrical properties of the row. For instance, in variation 1, each of the instruments state a row form immediately followed by the retrograde (SEE

<sup>35</sup> Julian Rushton, *Elgar: “Enigma” Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Jones, “variation form,” in *Oxford Companion to Music*. *Oxford Music Online*.

<sup>37</sup> Sisman, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*.

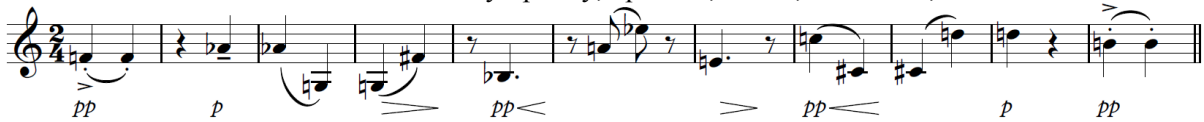
<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Kathryn Bailey, *The twelve-note music of Anton Webern: Old forms in a new language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 197, 199.

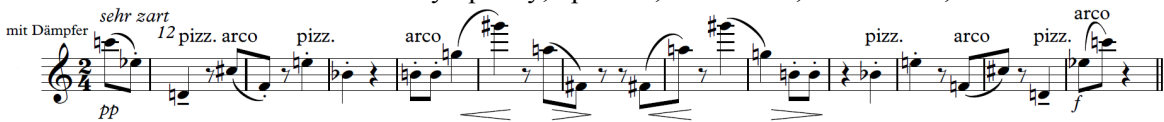
<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

EXAMPLE 1.8B). In variation 3, only fragments of row forms appear creating brief palindromes (SEE EXAMPLE 1.8C). Thus, the characteristics of the row are the primary means of alteration in a serial variation.

EXAMPLE 1.8A: Webern Symphony, op. 21/ii, theme, mm. 1–11, clarinet



EXAMPLE 1.8B: Webern Symphony, op. 21/ii, variation 1, mm. 12–24, violin 1



EXAMPLE 1.8C: Webern Symphony, op. 21/ii, variation 3, mm. 35–37, clarinet



### III. BRAHMS AND VARIATION

Among the common variation types presented here, Brahms's use of variation spans a wide range, covering ostinato, constant harmony, melodic-outline, formal-outline, and even traces of the fantasy variation. The constant melody variation is less pronounced in the composer's oeuvre, and none of his works portray the characteristic or serial qualities of variation. Through his writings on variation form, we realize his inclination to emphasize the role of the bass and to generally retain the structural integrity of the theme.<sup>41</sup> The current study will uncover his approach to theme and variation in his chamber works for strings, centering the analysis on the various techniques he uses in these pieces.

As described above by Marston, Perry, and Ivanovitch, variation form functions on several levels, simultaneously portraying paratactic and hypotactic tendencies, as well as recursive and discursive characteristics. As a composer approaching the genre at the end of the nineteenth century, Brahms

<sup>41</sup>These letters and writings will be introduced specifically in the following analytical chapters.

reconciles these ideas in his variations through the incorporation of both nineteenth-century organic unity and gradual structural transformation. He therefore combines the aesthetic ideals of the past and the present into a discursive dialogue of variation.

#### IV. CONTENT OF STUDY

The present study covers the four variation movements found in Brahms's chamber works for strings: (1) the Sextet in B-flat major, op. 18/ii, (2) the Sextet in G major, op. 36/iii, (3) the String Quartet in B-flat major, op. 67/iv, and (4) the String Quintet in G major, op. 111/ii. These works each offer a unique vignette into the composer's style and journey through variation technique. By examining these movements chronologically and in comparison with one another, I will construct a narrative of Brahms's compositional language as applied to variation form.

In the following chapters, I will present a focused biographical sketch of the composer's life and the contexts surrounding the composition of these works (Chapter 2), and subsequently, a literature review encompassing the methods of analysis typical in theoretical studies of Brahms's music (Chapter 3). Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 will cover, respectively, in-depth analyses of each variation movement pertaining to the current study. Finally, Chapter 8 will involve a discussion of all four variation movements, drawing conclusions and summarizing the narrative of Brahms's variation technique, as viewed from the perspective of his chamber music for strings. Through these conclusions, it will be possible to further comprehend the ambivalent qualities of the composer's stylistic choices, heralding him as both a champion of the past and a forerunner to the twentieth century.

## **Chapter 2: Biographical Contexts of Brahms's Chamber Works for Strings**

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) assumes a unique role in Western music of the Romantic era through his significant contributions and innovations to the musical style of the time. Recognized for his blending of lush romanticism with simple folk tunes and for his use of complex rhythmic devices such as hemiola, Brahms asserts an individual musical voice in the late nineteenth century. His compositional output penetrates all standard genres of nineteenth-century music with the exception of opera and the symphonic poem; his works include lieder, choral music, piano music, symphonies, chamber music, and concertos. Tallying Brahms's oeuvre yields a count of 122 opus numbers, plus additional works without opus numbers. His music bears intelligent design and intricate beauty, reflecting his persistent compositional process of continual rewriting.

Within Brahms's total output, his chamber music for strings offers a condensed vignette of his style and procedure. The works for strings consist of three string quartets, two string quintets, and two string sextets. Compared to his symphonic and choral works, these compositions reflect increased lines of counterpoint and less transparent textures. As a result, the string chamber music requires more compact writing and a higher sensitivity to detail, providing a window for understanding the foundational principles of Brahms's compositional techniques. A study of Brahms's chamber music for strings will thus prove to be a valuable inquiry for gaining perspective in his music at large.

Brahms's music bears imprints of his character and life experiences. His biographical narrative is therefore inextricably woven into his works. The following discussion places Brahms's chamber music for strings within the background of his surroundings and his inspirations, setting the framework for analysis and interpretation of these works.



## I. BRAHMS'S PROFESSIONAL PURSUITS

Brahms's musical studies began at an early age, as he was surrounded by music in his home with his father actively involved as a string bass player in the Hamburg city orchestra.<sup>1</sup> Piano was his primary instrument throughout his life, but he was also proficient on the horn, the violin, and the cello.<sup>2</sup> Raised in a family rooted in the lower economic class, Brahms's obligation to earn money was immediately apparent, and his professional experience in the field began in his early teens: he began teaching piano lessons at age twelve.<sup>3</sup> Brahms biographer Michael Musgrave asserts that during his teenage years, "most of his income appears to have come from teaching piano," despite irregular musical employments he probably enjoyed, such as providing musical entertainment for dinner parties, restaurants, and other social affairs.<sup>4</sup> In his youth, Brahms was even asked to travel outside of Hamburg for weeks at a time to instruct a young girl, Ms. Giesemann, in piano during the years 1847, 1848, and 1851.<sup>5</sup> Records of concert and stage programs show that he was also actively engaged in a concertizing career during this time. He participated as an accompanist to the Hamburg Thalia-Theater in 1851, and he traveled to Lübeck in the early 1850s on his first concert tour, a short fourteen-day trip in which Brahms accompanied two singers and a violinist during the Christmas season.<sup>6</sup>

These early experiences undoubtedly prepared him for greater opportunities. The year 1853 marks a milestone year in his professional career because Brahms began forming certain connections that would launch and inspire the rest of his musical work. In 1853, he was invited to accompany violinist Eduard Reményi (1828–98) on a concert tour in which Reményi introduced Brahms to gypsy music.<sup>7</sup> German scholar Kurt Hofmann elucidates further details regarding the consequences of this excursion: "The tour with Reményi in 1853, first to Winsen, then other towns in the area, led in turn to the meeting

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<sup>1</sup>K Marie Stolba, *The Development of Western Music: A History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston, Mass: McGraw-Hill, 1998), p. 515.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 17. Brahms began studying piano with Otto Friedrich Willibald Cossel from the age of seven. Shortly thereafter, he continued his studies with Eduard Marxsen, an accomplished pianist and composer. See George Bozarth and Walter Frisch, "Brahms, Johannes," in *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/51879pg1> (accessed June 19, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Kurt Hofmann, "Brahms the Hamburg musician 1833–1862," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, ed. Michael Musgrave (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, pp. 19–20.

<sup>7</sup>Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, p. 515.

with the violinist Joseph Joachim in Hannover and with the Schumanns in Düsseldorf; within only weeks the establishment of the closest friendships in Brahms's life."<sup>8</sup> In addition to the formidable support given to Brahms by these close friends, the eventful year of 1853 also ushered Robert Schumann's (1810–56) praise in the article titled, "Neue Bahnen."<sup>9</sup> Published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Schumann's endorsement propelled the young composer's career forward.<sup>10</sup> In the article, Schumann praised the young composer without restraint:

[It] seems that under these circumstances there inevitably must appear a musician called to give expression to his times in ideal fashion; a musician who would reveal his mastery not in a gradual evolution, but like Athene would spring fully armed from Zeus's head. And such a one *has* appeared; a young man over whose cradle Grace and Heroes have stood watch. His name is *Johannes Brahms*, and he comes from Hamburg, where he has been working in quiet obscurity, through instructed in the most difficult statutes of his art by an excellent and enthusiastically devoted teacher.<sup>11</sup>

As Schumann's article introduced his music to a wider audience, Brahms continued to forge the beginnings of his professional work. Between the years of 1854 and 1859, he split his time between his hometown of Hamburg, the Schumann residence in Düsseldorf, and the court at Detmold, while also touring and concertizing as a pianist.<sup>12</sup> At Detmold, Brahms spent the winter months of 1857 through 1859 performing recitals and giving piano lessons to the Princess Frederike and her ladies. He also conducted a women's choir at the court and occasionally directed the court orchestra when a choral work was involved. Since this was temporary winter employment, he continued teaching his piano students in Hamburg during the other months of the year.<sup>13</sup>

The years 1859–61 were spent primarily in Hamburg where Brahms dedicated his time to composition and directing yet another women's chorus, the *Hamburg Frauenchor*.<sup>14</sup> While the choir performed in public only three times under Brahms's baton, Brahms intended this artistic pursuit, like his

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<sup>8</sup>Hofmann, "Brahms the Hamburg musician," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup>"Neue Bahnen" translates to "new pathways," or "new roads."

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, edited by Konrad Wolff, translated by Paul Rosenfeld (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1952), p. 253. The "devoted teacher" Schumann refers to was the composer and pianist Eduard Marxsen.

<sup>12</sup>Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), p. 412.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, pp. 25–6.

<sup>14</sup>Plantinga, *Romantic Music*, p. 413.

engagement in Detmold, “to serve purely personal goals in the testing of his conducting and compositional capacities.”<sup>15</sup> He resigned from the choir in 1861 and removed himself from the city life to spend more time composing.<sup>16</sup>

In September 1862, Brahms visited Vienna, and began to establish his primary residency in that burgeoning city of musical development.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps one of his reasons for leaving Hamburg was his disappointment over failing to achieve the senior post as conductor of the Hamburg Philharmonic that opened that same year. Unfortunately, the conductor Julius Stockhausen (1826–1906) received the appointment, which deeply discouraged Brahms.<sup>18</sup> Despite his regret over the lost opportunity in his hometown, Brahms established new connections in Vienna by teaching piano privately, engaging in short tours as a pianist and conductor, and composing, often during his summers spent away from the city.<sup>19</sup> In the summers, he frequently traveled, either concertizing, composing, or visiting friends, many of whom gladly welcomed him to stay in their homes or share meals with their families.<sup>20</sup> Clara Schumann’s residence near Baden Baden became a favorite destination between 1864 and 1872, when he would typically rent lodgings near her home during the summers to absorb himself in peaceful composition within a friendly environment.<sup>21</sup>

Brahms also held two conducting posts while in Vienna as conductor of the *Wiener Singakademie* for the 1863–64 season and as choral and orchestral conductor of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* (Society of the Friends of Music) from 1872–75.<sup>22</sup> These professional experiences were rather short-lived and incapable of supplying him with a steady income. Given his status as a composer struggling to maintain financial stability, it may be surprising to discover that Brahms himself ended his post with the

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<sup>15</sup>Hofmann, “Brahms the Hamburg musician,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Musgrave, “Years of transition: Brahms and Vienna 1862–1875,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, ed. Michael Musgrave (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 31.

<sup>18</sup>Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup>Plantinga, *Romantic Music*, p. 414.

<sup>20</sup>Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, p. 196.

<sup>21</sup>Musgrave, “Years of transition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup>Plantinga, *Romantic Music*, p. 414

*Gesellschaft*.<sup>23</sup> Musgrave hypothesizes that the artist's creative spirit simply resisted the confines of permanent employment:

Brahms's failure to settle either professionally or personally during the period up to the *Gesellschaft* appointment and his tendency to remain on the edge of things finds its real context only in the realm of his compositional ambition. Had he possessed less talent he would doubtless have come to terms with practical issues more readily. But institutions took his energies and demanded more of him than he was able to give.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, the year Brahms chose to release himself from permanent employment marks the beginning of the period in which he became the most financially stable and independent as a composer.<sup>25</sup> Scholar Leon Botstein describes Brahms's income situation post-1875:

In his final years [Brahms] was appropriately proud of his financial success as a composer and musician who had lived well for more than two decades, primarily as a result of royalties. From 1875 on, he supplemented his income from composition by a not-too-strenuous regimen of concert-giving.<sup>26</sup>

Biographer Malcolm MacDonald agrees, writing that in the 1860s, Brahms "described himself as living an 'amphibian life, half virtuoso, half composer,' with the virtuoso winning the greater praise."<sup>27</sup> By 1875, however, MacDonald contends that Brahms "no longer needed to give concert tours as a primary source of income, and could pick and choose among invitations from all over Europe; meanwhile his reputation as a composer was riding ever higher."<sup>28</sup> Through his published works, Brahms therefore assumed self-sufficiency as a composer during the last twenty years of his life, allowing for greater freedom in his compositional artistry and technique. His concert tours and friendships took him to various cities and towns, frequently allowing the composer to gain new acquaintances and to form deep-rooted attachments. Friends and supporters often provided him with ample encouragement, and thus, his life connections directly influenced his work. Understanding Brahms's professional journey within the context of his lifetime will guide the periodization of his music.

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<sup>23</sup>Musgrave, "Years of transition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup>Leon Botstein, "Brahms and his audience: the later Viennese years 1875–1897," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, ed. Michael Musgrave (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 53.

<sup>27</sup>Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), p. 232.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

## II. PERIODIZATION OF BRAHMS'S COMPOSITIONAL OUTPUT

Considering the substantial output of Brahms's music, historians have often attempted to organize his music through periodization. These periods typically either reflect a broad organization by genre and performance medium, or more specifically in terms of the chamber works, an organization by stylistic development. Brahms's stylistic periods are either studied through particular characteristics shared among certain works, or more commonly, through periods of compositional maturity.

### *Broad Periods based on Genre*

Viewing the compositional output through broad lenses, Leon Plantinga notes that the order of Brahms's compositions reveals "clear periods of concentration on one genre or another."<sup>29</sup> He justifies this assertion by referring specifically to a surge of Brahms's chamber compositions between 1860 and 1865.<sup>30</sup> Plantinga further identifies a period in which Brahms concentrated primarily on vocal music from 1866–72, and then another period, beginning in 1873, when his focus returned to instrumental music.<sup>31</sup> These observations acknowledge that Brahms frequently composed works by genre, and it is also apparent that Brahms composed his chamber works for strings in a similar fashion: the two sextets were composed first, then the three string quartets, and finally, the two string quintets. Thus, chronology and genre provide a simple basis of organization for these compositions.

### *Stylistic Periods and the Chamber Music*

As another perspective into the composer's musical style, chamber music scholars often divide his works by applying one of two approaches: the practice of identifying thematic and topical periods in his style or by issuing his works into categories that reflect his early period, first maturity, high (second) maturity, and late period.

Margaret Notley introduces thematic periods in an effort to account specifically for the progression of his chamber music. She proposes that "[after] the youthful B Major Piano Trio, Op. 8,

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<sup>29</sup>Plantinga, *Romantic Music*, p. 414.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid. Plantinga cites several chamber works that Brahms composed between 1860 and 1865: Op. 18 Sextet in B-flat major, Op. 36 Sextet in G major, Op. 25 Piano Quartet in G minor, no. 1, Op. 26 Piano Quartet in A major, no. 2, Op. 34 Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 38 Cello Sonata in E minor, no. 1, and Op. 40 Horn Trio in E-flat major.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, pp. 417, 419.

Brahms's chamber music falls into three groups: those works completed, respectively in 1860–65, 1873–75, and 1879–94.<sup>32</sup> By parceling Brahms's chamber works between these time frames, Notley organizes the string sextets, quartets, and quintets by genre within the three periods. She correlates the three periods with the following metaphors: (1) Mode Change and Fugato in the Early Music, (2) Music as Logic: The String Quartets and the Third Piano Quartet, and (3) Borrowing, Allusion, and Recomposition in the Later Chamber Music.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, she cautions that the stylized period boundaries must be flexible: pieces composed during a certain time may share qualities and traits defined by another period, and labels should only “[serve] as a loose frame of reference.”<sup>34</sup>

David Brodbeck takes a similar approach as Notley in describing Brahms's style through varying degrees of compositional maturity. Holding to this notion, he arranges the chamber works chronologically into a chart with the following headings: (1) Early Period, (2) First Maturity, (3) High Maturity, and (4) Late Works (SEE TABLE 2.1).<sup>35</sup> The works are combined in a similar fashion to Notley's divisions.<sup>36</sup> While Notley has interpreted the works on a thematic level with extra stylistic associations, Brodbeck accepts a more universal view of Brahms's output based on maturity.

Periodization in Brahms's chamber music can therefore be approached in various directions, whether as stages of composition within a topical continuum or as overarching evidence that indicates maturity of style. Although both methods produce insightful perspectives, the latter is more commonly implemented in current Brahms scholarship, encouraging more freedom of classification through overall

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<sup>32</sup>Margaret Anne Notley, “Discourse and Allusion: The Chamber Music of Brahms,” in *Nineteenth-Century Chamber Music*, ed. Stephen E. Hefling (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), p. 243.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, pp. 247, 255, 262.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>David Brodbeck, “Medium and meaning: New aspects of the chamber music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, ed. Michael Musgrave (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 99. Brodbeck's chart has been reproduced on page 22, and the primary pieces of the discussion have been bolded by the present author. Other Brahms analysts writing before and contemporaneously with Brodbeck have reinforced the idea of organizing his output through periods of maturity. Biographer Jan Swafford names the B-flat major Sextet, op. 18 as “the piece that would herald his early maturity in chamber music” (Swafford, 1997, p. 203). Additionally, commentators Klaus Kropfing and Leon Botstein submit that “[the] Op. 51 quartets were composed during Brahms's maturity” (Kropfing and Botstein, 1999, p. 122). The concept of Brahms's first maturity as describing the works composed between 1859 and 1865 was presented earlier by musicologist James Webster. See Webster, “Sonata Form and Brahms's First Maturity (II),” *19th-Century Music* 3/1 (July 1979): p. 54.

<sup>36</sup>There are only two classification differences between Notley and Brodbeck: Brodbeck places the Piano Trio in C, op. 87 and the String Quintet in F, op. 88 in the second major period, denoting Brahms's high maturity, whereas Notley classifies those works in the third style period.

maturity rather than by stylistic topic. An awareness of these views adds deepened understanding in studying the compositional contexts surrounding his chamber music for strings.

**TABLE 2.1:** Periodization of chamber works published in Brahms's lifetime<sup>37</sup>

Work	Date of Composition	Original publication	vol. no. in NA <sup>a</sup>
Early Period			
Piano Trio No. 1 in B, op. 8	Jan. 1854	Leipzig Breitkopf & Härtel, 1854	ii/6
First Maturity			
<b>String Sextet in B-flat, op. 18</b>	<b>Summer 1860</b>	<b>Bonn: N. Simrock, 1862</b>	<b>ii/1</b>
Piano Quartet in G minor, op. 25	Autumn 1861	Bonn: N. Simrock, 1863	ii/5
Piano Quartet in A major, op. 26	Autumn 1861	Bonn: N. Simrock, 1863	ii/5
Piano Quintet in F minor, op. 34	Aug. 1862 (String Quintet); rev. 1864	Leipzig and Winterthur: J. Rieter Biedermann, 1865	ii/4
<b>String Sextet in G, op. 36</b>	<b>i, ii, and iii Sept. 1864; iv May 1865</b>	<b>Bonn: N. Simrock, 1866</b>	<b>ii/1</b>
Sonata in E minor for Piano and Violoncello, op. 38	i, ii, and ii 1862; iv June 1865	Bonn: N. Simrock, 1866	ii/9
Trio in E-flat for Piano, Violin, and Waldhorn (or Violoncello), op. 40	May 1865	Bonn: N. Simrock, 1866	ii/7
High Maturity			
<b>String Quartet in C minor, op. 51, No. 1</b>	<b>Rewritten summer 1873 (begun in 1860s?)</b>	<b>Berlin: N. Simrock, 1873</b>	<b>ii/3</b>
<b>String Quartet in A minor, op. 51, No. 2</b>	<b>Rewritten summer 1873 (begun in 1860s?)</b>	<b>Berlin: N. Simrock, 1873</b>	<b>ii/3</b>
Piano Quartet in C minor, op. 60	Winter 1873/74 (i and ii [in C# minor] 1855)	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1875	ii/5
<b>String Quartet in B-flat, op. 67</b>	<b>Summer 1875</b>	<b>Berlin: N. Simrock, 1876</b>	<b>ii/3</b>
Sonata in G for Piano and Violin, op. 78	Summer 1878 and Summer 1879	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1879	ii/8
Piano Trio in C, op. 87	June 1882 (i June 1880)	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1882	ii/6
<b>String Quintet in F, op. 88</b>	<b>May 1882</b>	<b>Berlin: N. Simrock, 1882</b>	<b>ii/2</b>
Late works			
Sonata in F for Piano and Violoncello, op. 99	Summer 1886 (ii in early 1860s?)	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1887	ii/9
Sonata in A for Piano and Violin, op. 100	Summer 1886 (begun in 1883?)	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1887	ii/8
Piano Trio in C minor, op. 101	Summer 1886	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1887	ii/6
Sonata in D minor, op. 108	Summer 1886	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1889	ii/8
Piano Trio in B, op. 8 (revised version)	Summer 1889	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1891	
<b>String Quintet in G, op. 111</b>	<b>Spring-Summer 1890</b>	<b>Berlin: N. Simrock, 1891</b>	<b>ii/2</b>
Trio in A minor for Piano, Clarinet (or Viola), and Violoncello, op. 114	Summer 1891	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1892	ii/7
Quintet in B minor for Clarinet (or Viola) and Strings, op. 115	Summer 1891	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1892	ii/2
Sonata in F minor for Piano and Clarinet (or Viola), op. 120, No. 1	Summer 1894	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1895	ii/9
Sonata in D-flat for Piano and Clarinet (or Viola), op. 120, No. 2	Summer 1894	Berlin: N. Simrock, 1895	ii/9

<sup>a</sup>*Johannes Brahms: Neue Ausgabe sämtliche Werke* (Complete Edition of Brahms's works, 1996–)

### III. BACKGROUND FOR THE STRING CHAMBER WORKS

This study will focus on Brahms's chamber music for strings only: the sextets (Opp. 18, 36), string quartets (Op. 51, Nos. 1 and 2; Op. 67), and string quintets (Opp. 88, 111). Specifically, this study will consider the works that have a theme and variation movement: (1) Op. 18 Sextet in B-flat major (second movement), (2) Op. 36 Sextet in G major, (3) Op. 67 String Quartet in B-flat major, and (4) Op. 111 Quintet in G major. The works are presented here chronologically by opus number and date of

<sup>37</sup>Chart reproduced from Brodbeck, "Medium and Meaning," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, p. 99.

composition. Their diversity facilitates an intriguing examination of his compositional process. Additionally, Brahms's life assumes an integral role in all of his music, and the string chamber works reveal this paradigm precisely.

### *Op. 18 B-flat major String Sextet (1859–1860)*

The B-flat major String Sextet is a cheerful and readily accessible work which serves as the introduction to this study. Brahms began this work in 1859; biographer MacDonald argues that it “could be regarded as the final fruit of his Detmold period.”<sup>38</sup> The work was completed in Hamburg in 1860, Brahms's hometown and temporary residence after leaving Detmold. Drinker describes Brahms's experiences in Detmold as “one of the happiest periods of his life, the period of the Ladies' Choir in which he so delighted.”<sup>39</sup>

As the first chamber work for strings without piano, the instrumentation of this work deserves further consideration. It includes pairs of string instruments: two violins, two violas, and two cellos, thus adding a viola and a cello to the traditional string quartet. His decision to compose in the sextet genre prior to any quartet publication reflects his struggle to rise above Beethoven's mastery of the medium.<sup>40</sup> Keys interprets this choice as a means for Brahms to “[find] compensatory ‘safety in numbers,’” while also noting that “nearly a dozen years were to elapse before the op. 51 quartets were published.”<sup>41</sup> These performing forces provided the opportunity for him to explore chamber music apart from the established string quartet repertoire and its consequent expectations.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>MacDonald, *Brahms*, p. 158.

<sup>39</sup>Drinker, *Chamber Music of Johannes Brahms*, p. 52.

<sup>40</sup>Paul Holmes, *Brahms: His Life and Times* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1984), p. 68.

<sup>41</sup>Ivor Keys, *Johannes Brahms* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1989), p. 196.

<sup>42</sup>Since the symphony and the string quartet were long-standing historical genres, there was great pressure to assert one's individual voice in a tradition which had been influenced by numerous masters of the past and present. Many Brahms scholars refer to the composer's extensive collection of early music, including numerous symphonies and string quartets from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Through studying his predecessors in these compositional realms, Brahms had a keen awareness of the development in these respective genres. And in combination with his commitment to preserving the past forms, he carried a burden of retaining these forms while simultaneously contributing his unique voice to the craft. For more on his challenge in writing for string quartet, see Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), pp. 383–5, and Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms*, pp. 209–10. Both discuss the struggle Brahms had in publishing his first string quartet. Swafford cites Beethoven and Schubert's quartets as difficult works for Brahms to follow. For more on the expectations Brahms fought in writing his first symphony, see Raymond Knapp, *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1997), pp. 1–59. Knapp submits an insightful discussion of the exact issues that Brahms faced in writing for the symphonic genre. Some of these challenges involved the results of Robert Schumann's prophetic statement in the *Neue Zeitschrift* in 1853, titled “Neue Bahnen.” In the article, Schumann praises Brahms to great length and



The Sextet was premiered by a close friend of Brahms and an accomplished violinist: Joseph Joachim (1831–1907). Joachim’s group presented the work on October 20, 1860 in Hannover. Brahms scholar Jan Swafford asserts that this “date marks the public debut of Brahms as a master of chamber music.”<sup>43</sup> As Swafford suggests, this premiere would be the first of many chamber performances that were well-received by the public and by his faithful supporters. Two years later Brahms used this work as a means to gain acceptance as a composer among the musical elite in Vienna. Informing readers of the Sextet’s influence in Vienna, Drinker portrays the scene:

This Sextet, more than any other work, endeared Brahms to the Viennese. He took it there (with the two piano quartets, Op. 25 and 26) on his first visit in September, 1862, and at its first performance by the Hellmesberger party,<sup>44</sup> all the skeptical critics were converted.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, historically, the B-flat String Sextet served two purposes: to introduce Brahms as a composer of string chamber music and to commence his life and career in Vienna.

### ***Op. 36 G major String Sextet (1864–1865)***

Despite the manifest success of Brahms’s first String Sextet in Vienna, the second Sextet, op. 36 in G major, was received less favorably upon its 1867 premiere. Led by the Viennese violinist Josef Hellmesberger (1828–1893), who had championed the B-flat String Sextet in Vienna five years earlier, the group was unable to convince the audience of its immediate value.<sup>46</sup> Within the motives behind this second sextet, however, a fascinating personal narrative of Brahms’s life is revealed. In the first movement, he spells a musical motive on the name of Agathe von Siebold, a beautiful singer with whom

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suggests that the audiences would delight in hearing a symphony by the young composer. This inevitably resulted in a high expectation for him to produce a significant work for orchestra. Also, Brahms greatly admired Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and he certainly was hesitant to follow after such a large-scale work. Knapp asserts that the greatest problem Brahms faced in writing a symphony was his own multi-faceted composition style, and the difficulty in reconciling his progressive harmonies, rich variations, and contrapuntal style to the genre of the symphony, especially when other contemporaries, such as Wagner and Liszt, had already abandoned the form.

<sup>43</sup>Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*, p. 216.

<sup>44</sup>Joseph Hellmesberger (1828–93) was the concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic and the conductor and artistic director of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* from 1851–59. He was also the head of the Vienna Conservatory from 1860–93. His quartet had a leading role in Vienna from the years of 1849–91, performing works by Schubert and Brahms, as well as many past composers. Among his many successful students, Hellmesberger taught both Leopold Auer and Jascha Brodsky. Brahms greatly admired the violinist’s artistry despite his difficult personality at times. See Richard Evidon, “Hellmesberger,” *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/12740pg2> (accessed May 29, 2012), and Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*, pp. 251, 306.

<sup>45</sup>Drinker, *Chamber Music of Johannes Brahms*, p. 52.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid*, p. 67.

he had previously fallen in love and exchanged engagement rings.<sup>47</sup> Siebold's father was a professor in Göttingen, a town in which Brahms grew fond of visiting various friends, and among them, the musical director Julius Otto Grimm (1827–1903). Evidently, Brahms had intended to pursue his marriage to Siebold until Grimm “had tried to exert some gentle pressure” for Brahms to move the relationship forward, and unable to bear the pressure, Brahms subsequently cancelled his engagement to Siebold.<sup>48</sup>

Brahms composed the first three movements of the G major String Sextet while spending the summer of 1864 away from Vienna in the resort town of Baden Baden, near the rustic village of Lichtenthal where Clara Schumann lived.<sup>49</sup> While surrounded by friends and the serene views of nature, Brahms wrestled against his lost love to Agathe. Swafford illuminates the technique in which the composer inserted the beloved singer's name into the G major Sextet:

In the first movement's climax, the pitches of Brahms's melody are A-G-A-D-H-E (H being the German name for the note B). The missing letter T is represented by the suspended D that comes in under the melody—so, A-G-A-D-H-E. At the same time, the D forms part of another word, made of the second A of the upper melody, the suspended D, the E of the next melody pitch. The other word is ADE, farewell. *Agathe, farewell*.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, Drinker also supports this analysis, indicating that “Brahms himself admitted that the recurring phrase in the second theme group, A G A H E, was intentionally a farewell to her.”<sup>51</sup> Swafford proposes that the work's musical content reflects an innate detachment, portraying Brahms's psychological denial of his feelings: “For the listener, the impact of the climax is as abstractly musical as anything critic Eduard Hanslick could have asked for in his doctrine of ‘absolute music.’”<sup>52</sup>

In comparison with the earlier B-flat major Sextet, the G major Sextet stands on a level of higher complexity and less immediately accessible. Unfortunately, the sextet received an unfavorable reception by the first Viennese audiences, potentially due to its increased complexity. Biographer Hans Gal recognizes the difference in compositional procedure between the two works, underscoring Brahms's

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<sup>47</sup>Hans Gal, *Johannes Brahms: His Work and Personality*, trans. by Joseph Stein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 94–5.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Jan Swafford, “Sextet No. 2 for two violins, two violas, and two cellos in G major, Opus 36,” in *The Complete Brahms: A Guide to the Musical Works of Johannes Brahms*, ed. Leon Botstein (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 145, and Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, p. 201.

<sup>50</sup>Swafford, “Sextet No. 2 in G major, Opus 36,” in *The Complete Brahms*, pp. 146–7.

<sup>51</sup>Drinker, *Chamber Music of Johannes Brahms*, p. 66.

<sup>52</sup>Swafford, “Sextet No. 2 in G major, Opus 36,” in *The Complete Brahms*, p. 147.

respective residencies while composing the two sextets. Gal submits that in contrast to Hamburg where the B-flat Sextet was completed, the Viennese musical culture “gave wings to his productivity,” and that “his ambition was enhanced by the higher level of competition in Vienna,” reflecting directly in his second String Sextet.<sup>53</sup> It is therefore apparent that Brahms’s life events exerted considerable influence in his compositional process, particularly of the G major Sextet, both through his location of residence and through his personal and emotional struggles.

### ***Op. 67 B-flat major String Quartet (1875)***

Brahms wrote the B-flat major String Quartet while vacationing in Ziegelhausen near Heidelberg in 1875. His summer stay in Ziegelhausen was on the Neckar, in the home of the portrait painter, Anton Hanno.<sup>54</sup> Historian George Bozarth describes the summer environment of Ziegelhausen as “bucolic,” suggesting that Brahms’s summer excursion contributed to the notion that “three of the four movements [of the B-flat String Quartet] find their roots in the folk idiom so dear to Brahms.”<sup>55</sup> In the vein of his earlier quartets, Brahms also dedicated his third String Quartet to a physician: Dr. Wilhelm Engelmann. This medical professional held the post of professor of physiology at Utrecht, and like Billroth,<sup>56</sup> he too was an amateur musician.<sup>57</sup> Engelmann played the cello, and his wife, Emma Brandes, was a pianist.<sup>58</sup> During the winter following Brahms’s vacation in Ziegelhausen, Engelmann and his wife graciously invited Brahms to stay at their home in Utrecht while he was concertizing in Holland. When the quartet was published the following year in 1876, Brahms dedicated the work to Engelmann from his gratitude and friendship to the family.<sup>59</sup>

Some historians may argue that Brahms wrote the B-flat major String Quartet as a diversion from his first symphony, which would be published in 1877. The third quartet was thus completed while

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<sup>53</sup>Gal, *Johannes Brahms*, p. 204.

<sup>54</sup>Drinker, *Chamber Music of Johannes Brahms*, p. 107.

<sup>55</sup>George Bozarth, “Quartet No. 3 for two violins, viola, and cello in B-flat major, Opus 67,” in *The Complete Brahms: A Guide to the Musical Works of Johannes Brahms*, ed. Leon Botstein (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 129.

<sup>56</sup>Theodor Billroth was a physician and an intimate friend of Brahms. Brahms had dedicated his earlier Op. 51 quartets (C minor and A minor) to him in 1873. See Klaus Kropfing and Leon Botstein, “Two string quartets for two violins, viola, and cello in C minor and A minor, Opus 51,” pp. 121–22.

<sup>57</sup>Drinker, *Chamber Music of Johannes Brahms*, p. 108.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Holmes, *Brahms: His Life and Times*, pp. 94–5.

forestalling his trepidations about the symphony. In a letter to a friend, Brahms remarked that the summer would be spent on “useless trifles to avoid facing the countenance of a symphony.”<sup>60</sup> Biographer Holmes states ironically that “[the] ‘useless trifles’ included his third and last String Quartet in B flat major, op. 67.”<sup>61</sup> This final quartet is in direct opposition to its predecessors. Swafford offers insight into Brahms’s perception of the work:

For Brahms and for his friends, the B-flat was like a shout of liberation after the austerities of the earlier two quartets. Years later he admitted to Joachim that it was his favorite of the lot. Hanslick preferred it too, as ‘more cheerful, clearer, more human. Brahms chose as favorite, in other words, the quartet in which he escaped his anxiety before the medium and managed to have fun with it. And with that he quit while he was ahead—there were no more string quartets.’<sup>62</sup>

MacDonald reinforces Swafford’s conception of the work’s brilliant character by distinguishing the B-flat String Quartet as “a work as carefree and capriciously inventive as the op. 51 Quartets had been severely logical and serious-minded.”<sup>63</sup> In this sense, the third quartet provides a contrasting complement to the other two works in the genre.

As his last string quartet, this work displays a cheerful design and was written during a short season in which Brahms appeared to be rather content. The work stands as an accessible and refined work in the genre, freeing Brahms to turn to less traditional instrumentation in his future string chamber music.

### ***Op. 111 G major String Quintet (1890)***

Brahms’s last chamber work for strings alone, the String Quintet in G major, Opus 111, was conceived and completed in 1890, during another summer spent in Ischl.<sup>64</sup> Between the years of 1880 and 1896, Brahms spent more time in Bad Ischl than in any other location; he frequented the town every summer from 1889 to 1896.<sup>65</sup> He must have garnered a deep sense a belonging among his friends and from the environment to have returned each summer, sometimes staying from May through October, as

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<sup>60</sup>Holmes, *Brahms: His Life and Times*, p. 93.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup>Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, p. 399.

<sup>63</sup>MacDonald, *Brahms*, p. 250.

<sup>64</sup>Keys, *Johannes Brahms*, p. 134.

<sup>65</sup>Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, p. 204.

he did in 1890.<sup>66</sup> Composed during this period of increased productivity, the G major String Quintet is labeled by biographer Paul Holmes as “joyous,” and “a work so fresh and positive that after a rehearsal in Vienna later that year, a friend suggested calling it ‘Brahms the Prater.’”<sup>67</sup>

MacDonald commends the work with great admiration: “Above all, there is a plasticity of ideas and a quality of bold, abandoned virtuosity in the handling of the ensemble that seem to develop from the solo writing of the Double Concerto and to surpass all the other chamber music for strings alone.”<sup>68</sup> Brahms, however, initially perceived this work to be the last composition that he would give to the public. For after writing the G major String Quintet, he was in such despair and discouragement that he proposed an end to his compositional career.<sup>69</sup> Fortunately, the depression was short-lived, and he forsook his declaration later that year upon discovering a revived desire to continue.<sup>70</sup> Regardless of his artistic rejuvenation, Brahms still must have been painfully aware of his own mortality, as in 1891, he submitted his “Ischl testament” to Simrock, a will in which he expressed the desire to bequeath his finances to needy musicians in Hamburg and Vienna. At that time, he also discarded any unpublished manuscripts he felt were unsuitable for distribution.<sup>71</sup>

Meanwhile, the G major Quintet was premiered on November 11, 1890 by the Rosé Quartet with the addition of another violist.<sup>72</sup> The premiere was successful despite numerous criticisms that Brahms received regarding the difficulty for the cellist to adequately project the melodic line in the opening bars of the first movement.<sup>73</sup> While Brahms would continue to explore new idioms of chamber music, such as the Clarinet Quintet, op. 115 (1892) and the Clarinet Sonatas, op. 120 (1895), his forays into the realm of chamber works for strings alone concluded with the virtuosic G major Quintet.

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<sup>66</sup>Keys, *Johannes Brahms*, p. 134.

<sup>67</sup>Holmes, *Brahms*, p. 141.

<sup>68</sup>MacDonald, *Brahms*, p. 342.

<sup>69</sup>Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, p. 566.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid. This renewed desire came from hearing Richard Mühlfeld, principle clarinetist of the Meiningen orchestra. Mühlfeld’s captivating tones inspired Brahms to write four new chamber pieces for clarinet. See Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, p. 31.

<sup>71</sup>MacDonald, *Brahms*, p. 296.

<sup>72</sup>Swafford, *Johannes Brahms*, p. 568.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid, pp. 566–7.

#### IV. HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ANALYTICAL STUDY

Brahms's chamber compositions for strings spans from the early works of his first maturity to music that represents his later style. Composed between 1859 and 1890, a great majority of the works came into existence during his high maturity (1869–1882). Collectively, the string chamber works reflect the intricacies of his compositional style on a smaller scale than that of his symphonies and choral works, and additionally, they are effectively cast alongside a narrative of the composer's life. While Brahms often drew inspiration for his music from important relationships and individuals in his life, other times he gained perspective from scenic environments when visiting pleasurable resort villages in the summers. His string chamber works are therefore the product of a variety of influential stimuli.

Bearing a relational imprint, works such as the G major String Sextet (op. 36) commemorate the lives and ideals of prominent individuals in Brahms's life, such as violinist Joseph Joachim and the beautiful Agathe von Siebold, respectively. Other scores in the string chamber canon stem from significant milestones in the composer's compositional history: examples of these pieces include the B-flat major String Sextet (op. 11), which afforded Brahms an introduction to the string chamber music as well as to the Viennese public; the Opus 51 String Quartets, representing Brahms's struggle and victory over the highly esteemed genre; and the G major String Quintet (op. 111), signaling a brief rest in composing as a result of Brahms's minor and temporary resignation from the craft. And finally, works such as the B-flat major String Quartet (op. 67) and the G major String Quintet (op. 111) reflect an unconventional spirit of optimism, composed while Brahms enjoyed the company of intimate friends and the beauty of picturesque scenes in the country.

A thorough analysis any composer's music acknowledges possible historical influences. Accordingly, by understanding both the periodization of Brahms's chamber output and the biographical framework surrounding his compositions for strings, a base of well-informed scholarship provides foundation for advanced analytical studies into the compositional processes of his chamber works for strings as related to variation form.

### **Chapter 3: Methodologies for Analysis in the Music of Johannes Brahms**

Significant discussion has centered on the musical works of Johannes Brahms ever since their conception, whether from discerning critics or esteemed colleagues of the composer. Analytical approaches to his works have therefore developed steadily throughout the last century, producing a wide range of techniques and methods for examining his music. Some approaches emphasizing organic unity or traditionalism find their beginnings during the composer's lifetime, originating in the writings of those who heard the first performances of his compositions. Other methods of analysis emerged later, including the theories of Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935)<sup>1</sup> and the concept of developing variation promulgated by Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951). These methods of analysis are all viable means for studying Brahms's music.

These methods reveal a unifying theme among the various intellectual champions of Brahms's music. While each individual approach appears to emphasize a particular salient feature of Brahms's compositional process, these techniques are not simply static modes of analysis to be exercised as in a textbook. Rather, they parallel the composer's own journey of continuous development through the interconnected nature that each method shares with the others. Many of these approaches illuminate both the traditional and the progressive aspects of harmony, melody, and rhythm. Through contrast and reconciliation, these methodologies underscore fascinating perspectives into Brahms's interdependent compositional styles of conventional adherence and developing practice.

#### **I. TRADITIONAL VERSUS PROGRESSIVE APPROACH**

In terms of conservatism and progressivism, music historians and scholars often describe Brahms as both a traditionalist and a progressive based on his approaches to harmony and rhythm. Some assume a stance of polarity when relating to the composer's works by identifying his music in one paradigm or

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<sup>1</sup>Heinrich Schenker's theoretical techniques emphasize the nineteenth-century concept of organic unity, yet through a methodical and early twentieth-century approach. While the general idea of his analyses draw upon the historical concept of organic unity, his method of graphic notation is a twentieth-century means of analysis.

another. Others are willing to accept this apparent dichotomy of style as the very fibers that constitute the artistry in his compositions.

In his essay, “Brahms the Ambivalent,” musicologist Karl Geiringer places himself in the latter group of scholars by capitalizing on the incongruent characteristics not only in his music, but also in the composer’s lifestyle. Offering an entertaining vignette into the composer’s life, Geiringer narrates many instances in which facets of Brahms’s personality appear contradictory—whether in the artist’s culinary tastes, his views on money, or his attitude towards love and marriage.<sup>2</sup> After describing the confusing characteristics of Brahms’s lifestyle, Geiringer presents the various progressive features of his music, such as irregular meter, asymmetrical phrases, unexpected modulations, and dissonant harmonies. He argues that in some cases, his progressivism exceeds that of Richard Wagner (1813–83).<sup>3</sup> Alongside such innovative characteristics, however, lies a commitment to the compositional practices that preceded him, and Geiringer explains this relationship of duality with the following:

He was, as we all know, a Romantic composer, writing music with numerous progressive features; at the same time he felt strongly attracted by the ideas of earlier musical thinking. Thus the ambivalence of his nature found expression in his art. Brahms was, as Wagner rather derisively stated, a classical romanticist.<sup>4</sup>

Others also recognize the inextricable relationship between his progressivism and his interest in music of the past. Scholar Elfrieda Hiebert describes him as a Janus figure who represents the past as well as the future.<sup>5</sup> By invoking the Janus image, Hiebert submits that Brahms represented a musical form of this god since aspects of his music portray both backward- and forward-looking elements.

To show his connection to the past, Hiebert draws attention to his interest in Renaissance and Baroque music, which imbued his compositions with a unique characteristic different from that of his

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<sup>2</sup>Karl Geiringer, “Brahms the Ambivalent,” in *Brahms Studies*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 2–3.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, pp. 3–4.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Elfrieda Heibert, “The Janus Figure of Brahms: A Future Built upon the Past,” *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 16 (1984): p. 76. In Roman mythology, Janus was a god who had two faces, and therefore, he could simultaneously view the world forwards and backwards. Additionally, Janus was the god of beginnings, and historically, he was associated with water, thus becoming affiliated with bridges, gates, doorways, and other thresholds. See Pierre Grimal, *A Concise Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, ed. Stephen Kershaw and trans. A.R. Maxwell-Hyslop (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 229.



nineteenth-century contemporaries.<sup>6</sup> The music of the Renaissance and Baroque bears a rich harmonic vocabulary with an organic approach to various inflections of pitch, operating on a modal structure rather than the more rigid tonal framework. Consequently, the apparent *progressivism* that many modern scholars observe in Brahms's music would not be as significant and revolutionary if it had not been for his persistent identification with the past masters of the craft. Hiebert further explains that it is through the way he "reinterpreted conventional relationships" that his progressivism becomes most apparent.<sup>7</sup> Commenting once again on this relationship, she reveals that "by loosening the restrictions on metrical flow and the close ties between harmony and melody, Brahms became a catalyst for progressive elements in twentieth century music..."<sup>8</sup>

Identifying progressivism and conservatism in his style generally accords with scholar Joseph Kerman's warning that musicology not consist merely of a positivistic exercise in uncovering facts and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Brahms, scholars are usually prone to form an opinion and support it. But why is there such an interest in reconciling the supposed separation between these diverging features? Indeed, these attitudes and approaches shape and motivate the analytical methods applied when studying his music. Many of the processes described below are based directly or indirectly on a conception of Brahms as a traditionalist, a progressive, or both. It would then be useful to first explore the aspects of his music and background that elicit these reactions.

### ***Brahms as Traditionalist***

To understand the relationship of the composer's connection to the past, Brahms scholar Virginia Hancock examined his vast library of musical literature and works.<sup>10</sup> By studying the music in his collection and the notations he made in these works, Hancock emphasizes the tremendous influence he drew from compositions of Baroque and Renaissance composers such as Georg Forster, Heinrich Isaac,

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<sup>6</sup>Hiebert, "The Janus Figure of Brahms," p. 74.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 18–19

<sup>10</sup>Virginia Hancock, "Brahms and Early Music: Evidence from his Library and his Choral Compositions," in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990): p. 29.

and Antonio Scandello, to name a few.<sup>11</sup> Musicologist Geiringer also catalogued the library by describing the critical literature about music and the numerous manuscripts the composer copied and collected.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the complete library that Brahms enjoyed, he also edited numerous editions of early and nineteenth-century music, and he frequently programmed the early music when conducting for the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* in Vienna.<sup>13</sup> Based on his library collection and his other intellectual affairs, Geiringer identifies Brahms as a musicologist of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding the composer's academic interests and extensive source library provides interesting details to his personality and lifestyle, but what significance does this bring to an analysis of his music? Brahms scholar Elfrieda Heibert believes that his dedication to studying the early music permeated many aspects of his musical style, whether through (1) his implementation of counterpoint inspired from Renaissance and Baroque music, (2) his use of step-wise melodies and harmonic progressions drawn from Baroque bass lines, or (3) the prevalence of thirds reminiscent of Beethoven's mediant relationships.<sup>15</sup> Assuming a complementary stance, music theorist David Lewin suggests that through Brahms's connection to the past, a listener can recognize "modes of Classical rhetoric and Renaissance technique" that appear as "dialectic relations, both among themselves and in connections with nineteenth-century—even twentieth-century—modes of discourse."<sup>16</sup> In his essay, Lewin draws upon specific instances in which historical conventions can be detected.

Peter Smith, another music theorist and Brahms scholar, also examines the influence of musical rhetoric from the same earlier periods that Lewin described. Smith focuses primarily on subject and answer rhetoric typically associated with Baroque composers of fugue, such as J.S. Bach. But rather than using points of imitation as the means for antecedent/consequent relationships, Brahms uses the fugue

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid, pp. 36–8.

<sup>12</sup>See Karl Geiringer, "Brahms as a Musicologist," *The Musical Quarterly* LXIX/4 (Fall 1983), pp. 464–5. In this article, Geiringer lists the numerous theoretical and historical books that Brahms owned and annotated, including works by Albrechtsberger, Fux, Hiller, Mattheson, Walther, and many others. The music manuscripts in his library were copied by the composer himself and consisted but are not limited to works by J.S. Bach, Cherubini, Frescobaldi, Handel, Lassus, Palestrina, and Schütz.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, pp. 466–8.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 463.

<sup>15</sup>Heibert, "The Janus Figure of Brahms," pp. 76–8.

<sup>16</sup>David Lewin, "Brahms, his Past, and Modes of Music Theory," in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990): pp. 18–9.

technique in a different sense. For Brahms, it is the principle thematic idea that serves as the conduit for subject and answer discourse.<sup>17</sup> In his discussion, Smith applauds the blending of historicism and progressivism as observed in his subject/answer rhetoric, and he supplies the following assessment: “[It] is precisely when Brahms is most engaged with tradition that his modernism shines through.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition to comparing the styles of Brahms and Bach, historian Charles Rosen juxtaposes Brahms and the classicists, such as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.<sup>19</sup> In his musical examples, Rosen demonstrates that the classical composers may have cultivated certain harmonic developments, and Brahms took them to an even higher level. He describes the Viennese master as undermining the classical conventions while still profiting from their stylistic foundation: “Brahms is both subverting the Classical tradition and at the same time exploiting it with a learning greater than any of his contemporaries.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the traditional view is not always conclusive; the scholars who recognize an influence of the past simultaneously acknowledge his innovation and progressivism. While both approaches are important, they are not conflicting perspectives, but rather, two continuums that flourish side-by-side.

### ***Brahms as Progressive***

The idea of Brahms as a progressive composer was a phrase coined by Arnold Schoenberg in a 1933 lecture he gave that was later published as the essay, “Brahms the Progressive,” in his book *Style and Idea* (1950).<sup>21</sup> There is no doubt that Schoenberg greatly admired the nineteenth-century composer, and in this essay, he acts as a sort of apologist in justifying Brahms’s innovative techniques in comparison to Richard Wagner, the latter considered a pioneer in late nineteenth-century progressivism. To support his claim that Brahms is a progressive composer, Schoenberg demonstrates the harmonic and structural innovations his music exhibits.<sup>22</sup> He compares him to the masters of the past, and he illuminates an interesting aspect of his style: basic motives, features, or structures invariably relate to the whole of a

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<sup>17</sup>Peter H. Smith, “Brahms and Subject/Answer Rhetoric,” *Music Analysis* 20/2 (July 2001): p. 231.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, p. 232.

<sup>19</sup>Charles Rosen, “Brahms the Subversive,” in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 108.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup>Arnold Schoenberg, “Brahms the Progressive,” in *Style and Idea*, ed. Dika Newlin (New York: Philosophical Library Inc., 1950): p. 52.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, pp. 57–8.

work. Schoenberg explains that as a mark of reputable music, these elements should not exist for themselves, but rather, they should “develop, modify, intensify, clarify, or throw light or color on the idea of the piece.”<sup>23</sup> This necessary quality of organization and unification is a characteristic that he believes is present in the music. While this essay gave readers new insights into perceiving Brahms as a progressive composer in terms of harmony and structural functions, subsequent literary contributions by Schoenberg later expanded Brahms analysis to an even deeper level.<sup>24</sup>

Offering commentary on the essay, musicologist Michael Musgrave encourages his readers to understand these assertions in light of many of the other writings the twelve-tone composer produced on Brahms. These apply to the use of counterpoint, harmony, theme, and form.<sup>25</sup> He explains that Schoenberg’s 1933 lecture is not comprehensive in terms of giving an accurate understanding of such progressivism. Instead, Musgrave surveys other writings by Schoenberg<sup>26</sup> that more fully delineate his approach to these analytical aspects. Through a study of these texts, he believes that Schoenberg sought to convey “the complementary as well as independent” roles that Wagner and Brahms shared in terms of innovative harmonic and thematic procedures.<sup>27</sup> Using Schoenberg’s terminology, Musgrave ascribes “suspended” and “fluctuating harmonies” to Wagner and “developing variations” to Brahms.<sup>28</sup> The concept of developing variation that Schoenberg proposes then serves as a springboard to subsequent scholarship and research into the music.

In another article, Musgrave refers again to Schoenberg’s famous essay on “Brahms the Progressive,” yet here he offers an alternative view of him: namely, that the composer was progressive by

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>24</sup>Among Schoenberg’s other literary writings, his *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, edited by Gerald Strang (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1967), was published posthumously in 1967. This textbook presents the idea of *developing variation* and its application to Brahms’s music. These ideas will be discussed in following in the present paper. The concept of developing variation is later assumed and further developed by many other Brahms scholars, such as Walter Frisch.

<sup>25</sup>Michael Musgrave, “Schoenberg’s Brahms,” in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990): p. 125.

<sup>26</sup>The Schoenberg writings that Musgrave examines include *Harmonielehre* (1911), *Style and Idea* (1950), *Structural Foundations of Harmony* (1954), *Preliminary Exercises in Counterpoint* (1963), and *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (1967). See Musgrave, “Schoenberg’s Brahms,” p. 125.

<sup>27</sup>Musgrave, “Schoenberg’s Brahms,” p. 126.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

his ardent support and prolific studies in early music.<sup>29</sup> Musgrave details his lifestyle and accomplishments through these lenses, affirming the revolutionary angle the composer asserted merely by his interest in music of the past. Once again, as evidenced above in the scholarship surrounding his traditional approaches, these opposing views that label him as a conservative versus a progressive are frequently thwarted, and scholars on either side cannot seem to discuss one without the other. It may therefore be the unsettling questions over what role he maintains in the history of music that spur the creation of the following approaches in Brahms analysis. They include (1) developing variation, (2) organic unity, (3) Schenkerian theory, and (4) ambiguity. These methods reconcile the ambivalent elements of the composer's compositional style, and just as experts tend to circumvent the boundaries of his traditionalism and modernism, these means of analysis also support and converge with one another to present a unified approach to his music.

## II. DEVELOPING VARIATION

As mentioned above, the concept of developing variation stems from Schoenberg's writings. When originally describing this idea, he gave a comparison between two thematic approaches in music: the model and sequence technique as exhibited in Wagner *leitmotifs*, and the process of developing variation, the latter of which he credits to Brahms and earlier composers.<sup>30</sup> Within the concept of developing variation, he introduces the idea of the *Grundgestalt*, translated *basic shape*, that represents the initial thematic germ or motive that is subsequently developed. Scholar Norton Dudeque explains that this concept was to Schoenberg "a melodic figure devoid of rhythm: a melodic outline."<sup>31</sup> While Schoenberg finds the historical significance of the *basic shape* and developing variation in Brahms, it takes little effort for one to realize that this germinal melodic motive, known as the *Grundgestalt*, serves as the basis to his twelve-tone rows and series. This idea of a basic motive that is developed and sustained

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<sup>29</sup>Michael Musgrave, "Brahms the Progressive: Another View," *The Musical Times* 124 (May 1983): p. 291.

<sup>30</sup>Norton Dudeque, *Music Theory and Analysis in the Writings of Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p. 134. Consult Schoenberg *Style and Idea* (1975) for primary source.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 135–6.

throughout an entire work brings an element of unity that Schoenberg desired, yet his definition and explanation of it remains rather amorphous.<sup>32</sup> As a result, later scholars have studied his writings to further explicate the idea of developing variation as applied to the music of Brahms.

German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus is one such scholar who chose to discuss the principles of developing variation in greater depth. Building upon Schoenberg's comparison of Wagner and Brahms, Dahlhaus explains that the two schools of composers, Liszt and Wagner of the "New German" school and Brahms of the "conservative" class, simply discovered different means of solving the same musical issue. Dahlhaus describes it as a problem that existed "between the narrow dimension of thematic ideas and the tendency toward large expansive, monumental forms."<sup>33</sup> Just as Wagner was striving to achieve continuity in his music dramas through sequence in the *leitmotifs*, Brahms brought deep unity to his symphonies through developing variation. Dahlhaus compares the latter process to that of logical or rhetorical discourse—a process in which the idea is continually developed or modified. In contrast, he asserts that Mozart used developed motives or thematic restatements as purely an architectural device that created formal structure and balance.<sup>34</sup> He then clarifies the encompassing role of unity that Brahms accomplishes through the use of developing variation:

With Brahms, on the other hand, the elaboration of a thematic idea is the primary formal principle, on which depends the integration of the movement as a whole, preventing it from appearing as a mere pot-pourri. Musical form takes the shape of a discourse in sound in which motives develop out of earlier motives like ideas, each of which is a consequence to its predecessors.<sup>35</sup>

In this explanation, Dahlhaus adds an integral component to the idea of developing variation. By defining the term as a formal process to music composition, we can readily comprehend how architectonic forms of balance and structure found in the music of the classicists represents the opposing method. Additionally, by accepting developing variation as a formal procedure, we can emphasize its foundational role in Brahms's music and understand the structural unity it provides.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid, p. 138.

<sup>33</sup>Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 48.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

A discussion on Brahms and developing variation would not be complete without considering the scholarship of Walter Frisch. His monograph on Brahms and developing variation offers a thorough treatment concerning the application of Schoenberg's theory of the *Grundgestalt* in Brahms's music. Building on the theories of Schoenberg, Frisch explores the idea of developing variation further, and he claims to offer a historical perspective to the composer's process.<sup>36</sup> He therefore studies the music in conjunction with developing variation through a chronological approach. To more fully understand the idea, Frisch consults Schoenberg's textbook, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (1967), and he notes that in this text, Schoenberg shows how a basic motive can be altered and developed through intervals, meter, rhythm, or contour, and that Brahms achieves this art through a freer treatment of motives than his classical predecessors had.<sup>37</sup> He also gives insight in showing that only in the later championship of Schoenberg's theories is the concept of developing variation applied to an entire movement or work, and he suggests that perhaps Brahms used the idea to challenge the formal principles of his time.<sup>38</sup> This is in contrast to the conventional approach that merely restates an initial idea. Frisch's scholarship on the topic is comprehensive and didactic, and it has shaped much of the current knowledge of Brahms and developing variation.

Writing a decade after the publication of Frisch's text, German musicologist Friedhelm Krummacher cautions against the prominence that has been given to intervallic relationships when studying Brahms's music through the lens of developing variation. He argues that many of the past analyses have isolated the melodic components from the rhythms and harmonies that surround them, as well as the dynamics and the form of the piece.<sup>39</sup> He also assumes a more historical perspective, encouraging period reception history, and most of all, understanding intervallic continuity in light of other factors, such as rhythmic continuity as well.<sup>40</sup> His analysis revolves around applying a more unifying concept of developing variation to the Brahms op. 51 string quartets. Furthermore, he advocates that

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<sup>36</sup>Walter Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 35.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, pp. 9–17.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid, pp. 18, 34.

<sup>39</sup>Friedhelm Krummacher, "Reception and Analysis: On the Brahms Quartets, Op. 51, Nos. 1 and 2," *19th-Century Music* 18/1 (1994): p. 29.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid, p. 38.

reception history documents can be useful tools in understanding the complexity of a piece “if the analysis is to do justice to the aesthetic claim of the work and not just to a theoretical objective.”<sup>41</sup> In this way, he affirms the necessity for multiple approaches when studying music.

By applying Schoenberg’s analytical technique of developing variation in addition to the logical discourse expounded by Dahlhaus, scholars can find an inherent unity throughout a work, albeit a changing and transforming unity. And Krummacher implies that an even deeper sense of synthesis is apparent when considering historical perspectives and other means for development. An aspect of continuity surrounds the analyses of these scholars as well as those that follow. This notion that some basic component (interval, rhythm, theme, harmony, etc.) can create cohesion in an entire work is often known as *organic unity*, and the approach holds a powerful role in the analytical methods scholars apply.

### III. ORGANIC UNITY

The concept of organic unity is found all throughout the writings concerning Brahms. As explained above, theorists who study developing variation find coherence through an initial melodic shape that is continually altered and transformed. The understanding then of organic unity could be considered a by-product of the theory. Alternatively, other analytical techniques also underscore the unique cohesion in his music through different means. For this reason, organic unity will be considered here briefly as an analytical perspective, although it must be understood that this idea is directly related to other methodologies, such as developing variation, Schenkerian theory, and ambiguity.

The Brahms scholarship that invokes organic unity is vast, and greater is the list of writings that merely imply a sense of unification in his music. In discussing the roles of the composer as a proponent for the past as well as an innovator for the twentieth century, musicologist J. Peter Burkholder calls upon this theme in describing the composer’s style:

Brahms’s thorough knowledge of the past allowed him to recreate old forms, from the familiar sonata to the virtually forgotten chaconne and invest them with the same *organic approach* to form which Mozart and Bach had demonstrated.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.



Burkholder appeals to the historical tradition that valued organic interpretation in music. Echoing this disposition, Brahms scholar Ann Besser Scott describes the concept of structural unity and the idea of organicism as an inherent compositional attitude of the nineteenth century. She explains that to hear music as organic was “a central preoccupation for most nineteenth-century critics, composers, and even performers.”<sup>43</sup> Appropriately, she details many examples of period literature and letters that emphasize the important function structural unity had for nineteenth-century listeners. In the examples, she supplies an excerpt from the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, in which critic Selmar Bagge wrote a review in 1868 regarding the Brahms Cello Sonata in E minor, op. 38. In this review, Bagge illustrates the nineteenth-century view of organic unity:

In all music that is to be effective and interesting in and of itself, that is to have lasting significance, and that is not merely intended to illustrate other arts, all depends on the richness of the relationship between the individual [moment] and the whole, on the *organic nature* of the construction and of its growth, as it were; all the more so as the work of music in fact constructs itself within our [very] ears and does not suddenly stand before us in clear view.<sup>44</sup>

Bagge refers to the “individual” as relating to the “whole,” and this idea is not unlike those discussed earlier that study a basic shape or motive that serves a deeper purpose throughout the work. Period evidence therefore confirms the value of organic conception in musical compositions of the nineteenth century, and thus, this concept is integral in interpreting his music.

Music theorist Rudolph Reti combines the theme of unity with the consistent development of thematic material. Through his studies, Reti shows how individual parts relate to the whole of a work between movements and within movements, specifically in terms of theme.<sup>45</sup> Reti illustrates the thematic process in Brahms’s Second Symphony by identifying small thematic motives that are inverted, transposed, and developed to bring unification across theme groups in the symphony. He even finds that

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<sup>42</sup>J. Peter Burkholder, “Brahms and Twentieth-Century Classic Music,” *19th-Century Music* 9/1 (1984): p. 78. The *italics* have been added by the present author.

<sup>43</sup>Ann Besser Scott, “Thematic Transmutation in the Music of Brahms: A Matter of Musical Alchemy,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 15/3 (1995): p. 177.

<sup>44</sup>As cited and translated in Scott, “Thematic Transmutation in the Music of Brahms,” p. 177. The excerpt comes from *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* 3 (1868): p. 51. Scott acknowledges Professor Joseph Malloy for supplying the majority of the translations. The *italics* have been added by the present author.

<sup>45</sup>Rudolph Reti, *The Thematic Process in Music* (New York: Macmillan, 1951) pp. 4–5.

the initial motivic kernels can reflect both first and second themes, according to their rhythm and their placement within the measure.<sup>46</sup> Reti's analyses incorporate other composers as well, both before and after Brahms.

Although organic unity was a prevalent concept of an earlier era, music theorist Edward Cone takes a forward-looking perspective in demonstrating how a more progressive aspect of Brahms's compositional language consistently provides structural unity to his works. Cone identifies this element as "harmonic congruence," and he defines it as the practice of using a series of specific melodic linear tones or intervals as the foundation for simultaneous harmonic language. In turn, the latter can be portrayed vertically as chords or arpeggiated as accompaniment.<sup>47</sup> In this way, Cone's harmonic congruence describes the use of pitch sets in music to demonstrate linear as well as harmonic cohesion. Cone's analysis is obviously influenced from Schoenberg's pitch sets and series, but in some of Brahms's later works, he even suggests that this technique of harmonic congruence was a critical element of the composer's style.<sup>48</sup> The concept of unifying the music through distinct tone patterns in both the melody and the harmony lends a more modern interpretation.

Since organic unity carries historical significance as well as capability for modern application, its relevance to his music is immediately discernable. It is therefore no surprise that Heinrich Schenker, a twentieth-century theorist and loyal supporter of the composer, based much of his theory on the idea of unity found within a complete masterpiece. In his description of diminutions<sup>49</sup> in *Der Freie Satz*, Schenker impresses upon the reader that every embellishment in a well-written musical work must ultimately relate to the whole of the piece. He delineates this essential quality of music with the following colorful description:

First, all diminution must be secured firmly in the total work by means which are precisely demonstrable and organically verified by the inner necessities of the voice-

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid, pp. 78–81.

<sup>47</sup>Edward T. Cone, "Harmonic Congruence in Brahms," in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 165.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid, p. 171.

<sup>49</sup>Editor and translator Ernst Ostler explains that by the term *diminution*, Schenker designates an "embellishment in a general, broad sense." See Heinrich Schenker, *Free Composition (Der Freie Satz)*, trans. and ed. Ernst Ostler (New York: Longman, 1979), p. 93.

leading. The total work lives and moves in each diminution, even those of the lowest order. Not the smallest part exists without the whole.<sup>50</sup>

Schenker invokes here the idea of organicism in diminutions, which serve on a foreground level in his theory. He expounds by explaining that if each of these embellishments relates to the whole of piece, than the events in the foreground will correspond accordingly to the deeper middle ground and background levels.<sup>51</sup> In addition to its vital role in developing variation, organic unity consistently serves as the foundation of Schenkerian analysis.

#### IV. SCHENKERIAN THEORY

Heinrich Schenker's devotion to the music of Brahms is no mystery, and he even dedicated his monograph on Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the epithet, "To the memory of the last master of German composition: Johannes Brahms."<sup>52</sup> Essential to Schenkerian theory is not only the foreground role of diminutions, but also the background concept of an *Ursatz* and an *Urlinie*.<sup>53</sup> These harmonic and melodic structures act as fundamental elements that govern the unity of a work, and each diminution can ultimately then be related back to this basic framework. Understanding this premise of Schenkerian theory shows how he views organic unity through the idea of an overarching melodic descent and harmonic progression which pervades the entire piece. In addition to basic unity (*Ursatz*), Schenker's theory is motivated by various levels of hierarchal structure.<sup>54</sup> Levels of hierarchy denote the deeper structures and tones that determine the significance of surface material such as diminutions.

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<sup>50</sup>Schenker, *Free Composition*, p. 98.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Heinrich Schenker, *Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: A Portrayal of Its Musical Content, with Running Commentary on Performance and Literature as Well*, trans. and ed. John Rothgeb (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>53</sup>In Schenker's theory, the *Urlinie* of a piece represents the *fundamental line* that delineates a melodic descent within the entire movement at a deep level (typically  $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ ,  $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ , or  $\hat{8}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ ). The *Ursatz* then describes the *fundamental structure* of the piece, which includes both the *Urlinie* and the underlying harmony (I-V-I). These components serve as the foundation of Schenker's background graphs, which show the deepest level of reduction. See Nicholas Cook, *Guide to Musical Analysis* (New York: G. Braziller, 1987), pp. 40-1.

<sup>54</sup>Charles Burkhart and Heinrich Schenker, "Schenker's Motivic Parallelisms," *Journal of Music Theory* 22/2 (1978): p. 145.

Despite Schenker's deep esteem for Brahms, theorist Allen Forte notes that the twentieth-century theorist himself did not publish exhaustive writings or graphs surrounding the composer's music.<sup>55</sup> As a result, an overview of Schenkerian theory as applied to Brahms incorporates many of the recent scholars who have followed in discussing structural unity through this perspective.

Organic unity can be found in many discussions regarding Schenkerian theory and Brahms. For example, in an analysis of the Intermezzo op. 117, No. 2, Schenkerian scholar Allen Cadwallader uses the idea of "concealed repetition" to demonstrate how motivic enlargement<sup>56</sup> fulfills a unifying role across individual levels and sections.<sup>57</sup> The cohesive element of a basic motive appearing at deep levels and expanded across larger spans of diminutions constitutes the essence of his article. By means of Schenkerian graphs, Cadwallader shows that despite register transfers and prolongation, its fundamental content is consistent between the contrasting A and B sections of ternary form. He subsequently asserts that the continuity of this basic motive, whether altered or expanded throughout the piece, imparts organic unity in reconciling the differences between sections.<sup>58</sup>

Whereas Cadwallader focuses on unity through a basic motive and its enlargement, another music theorist and Schenker scholar, Peter Smith, assumes an angle on sonata form that is directly related to Schenker's concept of the *Ursatz*. As formerly discussed, Schenker had a propensity for demonstrating inherent unity in a piece through the concept of a background fundamental structure. Smith argues that by applying this approach to traditional eighteenth-century compositions, Schenker was unable to reconcile the delineated formal events of sonata form with his single *Ursatz*. This is because the *Ursatz* suggests a continuous, developing tonal movement throughout the piece.<sup>59</sup> It is the tension between the formal

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<sup>55</sup> Allen Forte, "Motivic Design and Structural Levels in the First Movement of Brahms's String Quartet in C minor," *The Musical Quarterly* 69/4 (1983): p. 471.

<sup>56</sup> By "motivic enlargement," Cadwallader alludes to "expanded versions of an initial motive" that will typically "span formal units at various levels." Motivic enlargement is then one example of Schenker's "concealed repetitions." Here, Cadwallader presents a basic five-note motive introduced at the beginning of the piece, and he shows how certain tones are prolonged and expanded at deeper levels, which often coincide with formal structures of the piece. See Allen Cadwallader, "Schenker's Unpublished Graphic Analysis of Brahms's Intermezzo Op. 117, No. 2: Tonal Structure and Concealed Motivic Repetition," *Music Theory Spectrum* 6 (1984), pp. 1–2.

<sup>57</sup> Cadwallader, "Schenker's Unpublished Graphic Analysis of Brahms's Intermezzo Op. 117, No. 2," p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Peter H. Smith, "Brahms and Schenker: A Mutual Response to Sonata Form." *Music Theory Spectrum* 16/1 (1994): pp. 77–8. Concerning delineated formal units, Smith is referring to the exposition, development, and recapitulation, as well as smaller

sections of sonata form and the desire to unify a complete movement under a single structure that brings him to a realization that many of Brahms's sonata form movements lend themselves to Schenker's intent accordingly.

Smith describes Schenker's problem as follows: "By approaching late-eighteenth-century music from the perspective of a late-nineteenth-century organicist, Schenker delivers penetrating insight into numerous features of tonal structure, but he simultaneously distorts formal relationships to satisfy his own esthetic proclivities."<sup>60</sup> But this apparent problem with which Schenker struggles in conforming a piece to his organic intentions does not always exist in the music of Brahms, as Brahms frequently reconciles aspects of both architectonic structure (formal divisions) with organicism (continuous and developing harmonic motion). It is therefore possible to analyze certain Brahms sonata forms under a single concept, or *Ursatz*, as a result of his harmonic delays and formal adherence to thematic repetition.<sup>61</sup> In this way, the return of thematic material may announce the architectonic structure, but the delays encourage an organic interpretation. Smith ultimately proposes that Schenker's theory of organic unification is more suited to an analysis of later nineteenth-century sonata forms, and particularly those of Brahms.

Another specific concept of Schenkerian analysis is the *linkage* technique (*Knüpftechnik*), as explained in Schenker's text titled *Harmony* (1954).<sup>62</sup> Scholar John Daverio defines linkage as "the binding together of successive phrases by recycling the tail of the first as the head motive of the second."<sup>63</sup> Examples of linkage can be found in the Piano Sonata No. 1 in C major, op. 1 and the Sonata for Clarinet and Piano in F minor, op. 120, No. 1.<sup>64</sup> This technique creates yet another unifying context in which Brahms's music may be studied between phrases.

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sub-groups. Particularly in the case of the development and the recapitulation, the key center fluctuates frequently in the former, and principle themes and key areas are reasserted in the latter. These architectonic boundaries often work against the idea of a unifying *Ursatz*.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid, p. 86.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid, pp. 78-80; 86-7.

<sup>62</sup>Heinrich Schenker, *Harmony*, ed. Oswald Jonas, trans. Elisabeth Mann Borgese (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. 3-12.

<sup>63</sup>John Daverio, *Crossing Paths: Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 160.

<sup>64</sup>Scott, "Thematic Transmutation in the Music of Brahms," p. 180.

Interpreting continuity through overlapping motivic material in phrases can suggest an ambiguous perception in realizing where the ending or the beginning of a phrase may lie. Music theorist Roger Graybill applies Schenkerian analysis to a different form of ambiguity: uncertain harmonic function. To show this apparent lack of clarity, he uses two Schenkerian graphs of the Brahms F major Cello Sonata: a graph by Schenker and a graph by Graybill. In studying the three keys presented in the exposition, Graybill argues that they can be viewed with varying levels of interpretation in determining which harmony presides over another.<sup>65</sup> He shows how both Brahms's progressive and traditional tendencies present a tension that informs the harmonic and thematic features in the work.<sup>66</sup> Throughout his research, Graybill capitalizes on the friction between the backward- and forward-looking styles, and he finally claims that both analyses, Schenker's and his own, should stand side-by-side as equally descriptive.<sup>67</sup>

Graybill's allowance for two separate readings in a finite musical passage is particularly notable in the case of Schenkerian theory. Of further interest is that his logic in accrediting these apparently contrasting analyses is that they parallel both Brahms's traditional and progressive attributes. As shown above, while Schenker's theory typically encourages the discovery of a distinct unity in an entire movement or piece, Graybill contends that at times, two opposing viewpoints will possess equal validity in an analysis. The concept of two compelling and opposing levels of interpretation describing the dual function of a musical component shapes the analytical approach of ambiguity to be examined below.

## V. AMBIGUITY

Analyst David Epstein introduces the concept of ambiguity as a mode of study that functions as a "subpremise" to the more established "premises" that typically form the gamut of methodological approaches.<sup>68</sup> For example, Schoenberg's principle of the *Grundgestalt*, Schenker's theory of the unifying *Ursatz*, and Reti's idea of thematic unity are all premises on which to interpret the organization of a

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<sup>65</sup>Roger Graybill, "Harmonic Circularity in Brahms's F major Cello Sonata: An Alternative to Schenker's Reading in *Free Composition*," *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (1988): pp. 45–8.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>68</sup>David Epstein, *Beyond Orpheus: Studies in Musical Structure* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1979), pp. 161–2.

musical passage or work. If ambiguity suggests that more than one perspective can be applied and understood simultaneously, does this destroy the earlier premises and ideas of analysis as outlined in the present paper? Epstein argues not, and in fact, he believes that by studying instances of ambiguity in its own right as well as applied to other established principles, it may offer “an insight into this kind of premise-influenced compositional thought.”<sup>69</sup> In some ways then, ambiguity affirms the prior modes of analysis while consequently questioning the legitimacy of their respective roles in certain passages. Ambiguity offers multiple levels of interpretation, and in this respect, it sheds further light on the substance that comprises other analytical approaches.

Applying the theory in this way, Epstein explores the structural complexities in Brahms’s Second Symphony through rhythm and harmony, commenting on the uncertainty that these devices create in a structural context. He shows how harmonies are often stated yet not affirmed in the expected tonality, and he also emphasizes the confusion created over coexisting interpretations of weak and strong stresses, as in hypermeter. This puzzlement ultimately affects the understanding of large formal units in the work. The ambiguities in the beginning of the Second Symphony are vast, and Epstein even suggests that the first 43 measures could be viewed as an elongated structural up-beat since rhythmic and harmonic clarity are left in question until measure 44.<sup>70</sup>

Also exploring ambiguity through its relationship to structural foundations, Jonathan Dunsby articulates the concept of “opposition analysis,” a position inspired by Schoenberg that profits from exploring the significance of contradictory relationships in music.<sup>71</sup> He explains that for Schoenberg, harmonic ambiguity is represented “by exposing the conflict between different harmonic functions, without seeking to resolve it in a single analytical metaphor.”<sup>72</sup> Interesting aspects of the music therefore emerge out of a close study of contrasting details in the music. This perspective encourages an acceptance of the conflicting material as a means of comprehending a deeper aspect of the compositional process.

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid, p. 162.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid, pp. 162–6.

<sup>71</sup>Jonathan Dunsby, *Structural Ambiguity in Brahms: Analytical Approaches to Four Works* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), p. 108.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid, p. 20. Here, Dunsby summarizes Schoenberg’s views as expressed in his *Structural Functions of Harmony* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1969).

Dunsby examines four works<sup>73</sup> by Brahms in order to discover meaningful analysis based on structural conflicts. His research approach is largely indebted to the influence of both Schoenberg and Schenker.

In addition to harmonic and melodic uncertainty, a study of ambiguity in Brahms's music is not complete without a consideration of the rhythmic complexities he creates through processes such as hemiola, syncopation, shifting of the bar line, or discontinuity in rhythmic groupings within the measure. These mechanisms, along with other devices, are described in Walter Frisch's essay on "The Shifting Bar Line" in Brahms's music.<sup>74</sup> In accordance with Dunsby, Frisch also credits Schoenberg as "the first major critic to point to the ambiguity between notated and perceived metre [sic] in Brahms and to suggest that it comprised a fundamental and innovative aspect of Brahms's art."<sup>75</sup> As a result, Frisch builds upon the groundwork laid by Schoenberg and developed by others as he discusses the many instances of metrical displacement in the composer's oeuvre. He proves how the idea of metrical ambiguity has historical roots in past masters such as Bach, Mozart, and Haydn, reflecting the composer's penchant for earlier music. He subsequently advances that Brahms's use of rhythmic uncertainty holds structural roles in both formal articulation and motivic development.<sup>76</sup> Although ambiguity may present uncertainty, the complexity in turn serves to draw attention to these features in his music. Frisch then offers insight into the functions and history surrounding this concept.

Following after Epstein and Frisch, Schenkerian theorist Peter Smith combines both rhythmic and harmonic aspects in his discussion about complexity in Brahms. Tantamount to his argument are two basic types of ambiguity: (1) metric displacement of strong and weak relationships and (2) harmonic reinterpretation when harmonies lie a fifth apart.<sup>77</sup> In each of these instances, Smith provides examples in which varying interpretations can provide a back-and-forth type of analysis. For instance, a singular

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<sup>73</sup>The four Brahms works that Dunsby studies include the following: (1) *Variations on a Theme by Handel*, op. 24, (2) first movement of Piano Quartet in C minor, op. 60 (3) first movement of Symphony No. 4 in E minor, op. 98, and (4) *Intermezzo*, op. 119, No. 1.

<sup>74</sup>Walter Frisch, "The Shifting Bar Line: Metrical Displacement in Brahms," in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 155–6.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid, p. 140.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid, pp. 149–54.

<sup>77</sup>Peter H. Smith, "You Reap What You Sow: Some Instances of Rhythmic and Harmonic Ambiguity in Brahms," *Music Theory Spectrum* 28/1 (2006): p. 58.



motive may be heard metrically as weak-strong within its first few statements, but then as strong-weak in subsequent entrances.<sup>78</sup> This ambivalence gives the listener slight confusion in understanding exactly what Brahms intended.

In terms of harmony, if no predominant (or secondary) harmonies exist, a harmonic motion of I-V-I-V can easily be interpreted as a IV-I-IV-I movement as well. In many of these cases, Smith demonstrates how a vacillating metric motive or harmonic construction is often confirmed to be one or the other through retrospective interpretation. In other words, Brahms will eventually reach a moment of clarity in rhythm or harmony (or both) which elucidates the previous ambivalence.<sup>79</sup> Retrospective interpretation is a common theme throughout Smith's article. Yet despite such eventual resolution, the ambiguity still exists and is an important component. Thus, alongside the numerous examples of uncertainty in the composer's music, he also continually shows how Brahms offers a solution to the ambiguity, often through a combination of harmonic and metrical transparency.

It may be expected for a Schenkerian scholar to emphasize resolution, or a retrospective analysis, in order to solve an ambiguous dilemma and ultimately achieve harmonic and rhythmic unity. On the other hand, Smith does not avoid this concept of complexity, which again demonstrates the inherent overlapping styles of analysis as applied to Brahms's music. If a Schenkerian practitioner can consider ambiguity and if Schoenberg was the first to tailor it to the composer, then the lines of demarcation across these analytical techniques appear to blur. In essence, the concept of ambiguity penetrates all methods of study in Brahms, whether developing variation, Schenkerian theory, or even organic unity, the latter of which may seem a contradiction to Dunsby's analytical device of opposition. Ambiguity, however, maintains a pervasive role that suggests yet another unifying element of analysis. Although it underlines incongruent relationships, it also serves as a tool that balances all other approaches.

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid, pp. 61–5.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid, pp. 82–7.

## VI. UNITY IN ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Among the overarching themes of analysis in Brahms's music, it becomes immediately apparent that these tools achieve their greatest significance when implemented as both independent and dependent instruments. When combined in conjunction with other means of analysis, their individualities and unique purposes often shine brighter than when applied singularly. Furthermore, in moving from developing variation to organic unity, to Schenkerian theory, and finally, to ambiguity, the discussion has come full circle to the ambivalence that Karl Geiringer addressed regarding the duality of traditionalism and progressivism in Brahms's music. While Geiringer was referring to ambivalence of contrasting characteristics in style, the concept of ambiguity relates to opposing interpretations of individual musical events. Both terms thus illuminate the idea of tension and reconciliation.

Can these approaches then function as metaphors to the composer's life and background? Or specifically, do the historical details of his life influence a backdrop of contrasting themes and issues that find deeper meaning when combined? For instance, just as modern and conservative aspects of the composer's style interweave to provide a comprehensive understanding of his life and works, so the analytical methodologies pertinent to his music parallel this concept through their constant borrowing and sharing from one another. This then provides a thorough comprehension of a complete passage or masterpiece.

Each approach subsequently relates to the others. Developing variation invokes an organic interpretation through the means of a basic shape transforming to penetrate the entire movement, and Schenkerian theory reveals and reconciles ambiguities based on fundamental structures and hierarchal levels. Additionally, both developing variation and Schenkerian thought converge on the idea of organic unity, and each of their founders possessed extreme interest in past musical traditions. Indeed, Schoenberg and Schenker shared an interest in the past as well as an admiration for Johannes Brahms and his music. While neither of their theories succeeded in analyzing his music conclusively during their lifetimes, modern theorists continue to unlock the enigmas of Brahms's music through these theories. The complexities of the theoretical approaches thus mirror the ambivalence of the composer's style.

Accordingly, with the great scholarly focus that encompasses his traditionalism and progressivism, do these compositional approaches embrace this dichotomy of style? For Brahms, to reduce his process to an “either or” paradigm would be to perform an injustice to his music and to his art. By viewing Brahms as the Janus figure, Elfrieda Hiebert suggested that Brahms could look forward and backward concurrently while embodying a single compositional spirit. The continuums of progressivism and traditionalism can then be viewed as existing in an organic sense, analogous to the unified unfolding of a germinal cell in developing variation, or as the diminutions that all relate back on varying levels to the Schenkerian *Ursatz*. Through tension and reconciliation, these approaches confirm the unique ability of his music to invoke past masters as well as to inspire progressive practices. Mainstream analytical approaches therefore provide a structure and design molded specifically to identify and support the composer’s artistic process.

Perhaps Hiebert also had the other historical associations of Janus in mind when she suggested this god as a metaphorical symbol of Brahms. As mentioned previously, not only was Janus thought to be a god with two heads looking forward and backward, but he was also known as a gate-keeper or crossway over water. Comparing Brahms with these other attributes proves to be an insightful discipline. Just as Janus was connected to the idea of a gate over a threshold or a bridge across a water-way, Brahms’s commitment to the past allowed him to act as a bridge between nineteenth-century romanticism and twentieth-century thought. Accordingly, it is precisely the various modes of analysis that allow us to understand Brahms and his music in this context. While the principle of organic unity was an essential guide in the nineteenth century, other approaches emerged more or less in the twentieth century, and the synthesis of these methods uncovers the unification Brahms achieved between two contrasting eras of musical composition.

## Chapter 4: Historical Roots in the Baroque Tradition: Brahms's Sextet in B-flat major, Op. 18

Many scholars and biographers have proposed that Brahms chose the performing forces of a string sextet (two violins, two violas, and two cellos) to avoid more established ensembles such as the string quartet and the symphony.<sup>1</sup> A sextet carries qualities of both the chamber and the symphonic idiom, and it allows for rich harmonies as well as doubling. Additionally, the inclusion of the second cello allows one to provide the foundational bass support while the first functions freely in a melodic role. Regardless of his motivations in selecting this ensemble, however, his Op. 18 sextet in B-flat major is an early example of the young composer's treatment of the formal principle of theme and variation. The second movement, an Andante, is cast in this formal design.

James Webster identifies the beginning of Brahms's "first maturity" to encompass his works in the early 1860s, spanning from 1859 to 1865.<sup>2</sup> Since the Op. 18 sextet was completed in 1860, and because the second movement is written in the form of theme and variation, this movement is the earliest theme and variation design categorized in his first maturity. Likewise, the second sextet (op. 36 of 1864), to be studied in chapter 5, is the last work classified under Webster's definition of Brahms's "first maturity" that contains a theme and variation.<sup>3</sup> These works open and close a pivotal period in his compositional career. Webster shares this periodization to illuminate the composer's first success in combining innovative techniques as well as traditional practice into large-scale works.<sup>4</sup> He also notes that those years (1859–65) were much steadier for Brahms in terms of emotional and professional stability, than the preceding years.<sup>5</sup> As one of the first works representing his compositional maturity, the Op. 18

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<sup>1</sup>Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*, p. 216. For more suppositions and scholarly research regarding Brahms's choice of the string sextet ensemble, see McDonald, *Brahms*, p. 158, and Keys, *Johannes Brahms*, p. 196.

<sup>2</sup>Webster, "Schubert's Sonata Form and Brahms's First Maturity (II)," pp. 52–54.

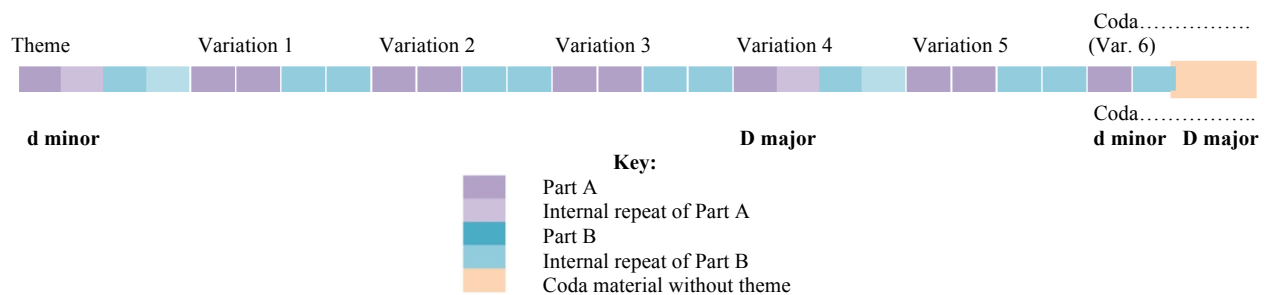
<sup>3</sup>Elaine Sisman, "Brahms and the Variation Canon," *19th-Century Music* 14/2 (Autumn 1990): p. 133. Also, see the table on page 144. Other works within his "first maturity" that are built on the principle of theme and variation include the Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel, op. 24 (1861), Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, op. 23, piano four-hands (1861), and Variations on a Theme by Paganini, op. 35 (1862–63).

<sup>4</sup>Webster, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 54. Webster describes the composer as becoming more settled by establishing Vienna as his primary residence in these years. He describes the preceding years (1854–59) as "a single period of crisis and renewal," due to many of the personal events that occurred in Brahms's life at the time. Furthermore, as mentioned above, Webster argues that these years (1859–65)

Sextet bears a unique imprint of the 30-year-old composer’s newly established career. While Brahms was always imparting an individual voice in his music, this early example reflects his deep veneration of historical roots and traditions. In particular, the following discussion will underscore the Baroque influences that shape the movement. Consequently, Brahms builds his theme and variation on the principle of Baroque variation while simultaneously stretching the harmonic and melodic content to appeal to a nineteenth-century audience.

**FIGURE 4.1:** Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii, Broad formal scheme



## I. FORMAL OVERVIEW

The second movement of the Sextet is composed of a theme with five variations and a coda that includes a partial sixth variation. Brahms does not conceal the variation form that inspires this movement, demarcating each variation with repeat signs or double bar lines, and using the latter when there is a written-out repeat. The theme and all ensuing variations are equal in length, consisting of two eight-measure phrases (part A and part B), which are both repeated, whether written out by the composer or specified through a repeat sign. This pattern of eight-bar phrases is consistent throughout the entire movement (SEE FIGURE 4.1). The movement begins in D minor, the mediant of B-flat major, with two variations (variations 4 and 5) in the parallel *maggiore*.

Even though the lengths of the variations occur regularly, one of the most intriguing formal aspects of this movement is the exchange of the final variation 6 and the closing material of the coda in

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coincide with the first maturity since Brahms’s compositional output in the large-scale genres (quartets, symphonies, etc.) began in the 1860s and was fully consummated afterwards (first string quartets: 1865–73; first symphony: 1877).

measures 129 to 159. partial variation 6 follows the same proportions of the preceding variations except for the lack of repeats; part A is the first eight-bar statement (mm. 129–36), followed by part B in the next eight-measure statement (mm. 137–44). Both also carry a similar harmonic scheme to their previous counterparts in the movement. What is most striking, however, is that Brahms uses a phrase elision in measure 144 as variation 6 is closing and the full coda material begins (SEE EXAMPLE 4.1). This overlap is particularly significant because it is the first and only time, within the entire movement that the strict eight-bar formal structure is compromised. This moment allows for a seamless transition between the final variation and the closing material, initiated by the first cello prematurely in measure 143, and then carried by the violins in 144. Meanwhile, the bass continues the basso ostinato pattern into measure 144. While this crucial juncture is the last of the eight bars for part B of variation 6, it is also the first of the eight bars for the coda: Two eight-measure phrases close the movement, beginning at measure 144. This point represents a formal point of convergence as well as an aberration from the established structure.

EXAMPLE 4.1: Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii, elision of phrases in coda (mm. 142–6)

With an idea of the overall formal structure, its regularity, and its brief deviation, it is necessary to understand the melodic and harmonic components of the theme, which serve as the basic building blocks of the movement. Many of the characteristics found in the theme provide the foundation for the variations to follow.

## II. THE THEME: A BINARY DESIGN

The binary theme has written-out repeats of both the A and B sections: A (mm. 1–8), A' (mm. 9–16), B (mm. 17–24), B' (mm. 25–32). Based on an identical harmonic framework, the A and A' sections vary according to the scoring and instrumentation used for the principal melody and the supporting harmony. In the initial A section, the first viola states the tune, and in the second A' section, the first violin assumes the same melody an octave higher. The form is a continuous simple binary as the A section ends on a half cadence in d minor, and the B section returns to d minor with a perfect authentic cadence.

### *Passacaglia*

An interesting aspect of this particular theme and its successive variations is the ground bass and harmonic structure that provide unity throughout the movement. As a result of its strict structure and recurring bass and harmony, the movement could be loosely described as either a passacaglia or a chaconne.<sup>6</sup> Following the contour and harmonic implications of the bass is useful to study of the basic thematic and harmonic content of the theme. In EXAMPLE 4.2, the first A and B sections of the theme have been reproduced to draw attention to both the melodic content, as stated by the viola, and the basso ostinato, as shown below the solo. This harmonic and bass support sets a precedent for the variations to follow. At times the basso ostinato pattern is altered, and other times, the composite harmonies, as shared by the entire ensemble, reflect a brief shift from the standard established in the theme. The general foundation, however, remains consistent in terms of the motion towards the dominant in the A section and then closure in the tonic in the B section, all by means of mostly stepwise motion.

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<sup>6</sup>Alexander Silbiger, "Passacaglia," In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/21024> (accessed May 18, 2012). See also his writings in the same source under the title, "Chaconne." Silbiger explains that while the term *passacaglia* appeared first in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spain to denote short passages between the strophes of a song that drew upon improvisatory techniques, its history eventually converged with that of the chaconne as it became a more independent set of variations grounded by a recurring harmonic progression and/or basso ostinato.

**EXAMPLE 4.2:** Brahms Sextet op. 18/ii, harmonic content in parts A and B of the theme

**Theme, part A: mm. 1–8**

d: i V<sup>6</sup> i V<sup>6</sup>/VII VII III<sup>6</sup> iv III VI V

**Theme, part B: mm. 17–24**

d: i VII V I V<sup>7</sup>/V I<sup>6</sup> IV V<sup>6/5</sup>/V V i

***Basso Ostinato and Harmonic Progression***

In part A of the theme, the bass descends by step through the downbeat of measure 7, apart from a few neighboring figures and inflections of tone: D–C#/C $\flat$ –B $\sharp$ /B $\flat$ –A–G–F. The half cadence in D major is then led by an upper neighboring tone to A. Another clear pattern in the bass is apparent in part B. Here, the bass begins its descent to A in mm. 17–20, yet in measure 21, the bass returns to its initial tonic pitch, this time with a mostly chromatic ascent also to the dominant pitch (mm. 21–23). It is important to note that the harmonic rhythm moves twice as fast in its ascent as it does in the preceding descent to the dominant. The inflections on C and C-sharp as well as B and B-flat suggest the inclusion of a pre-tonal harmonic language. The chromatic inflections, stepwise bass, and goal-oriented harmonic progression all provide a foundational structure inherent to the theme. While such elements function as the connecting tissue across variations, an integral part of the theme that must not be ignored is the basic melody introduced in the theme and varied thereafter.

***Melody***

Brahms's choice of melodic content in this variation movement includes several ascending leaps. Beginning with a leap of a perfect fourth (*sol* to *do*), the leaps widen progressively to a sixth (mm. 2, 3)



and then to an octave (mm. 4, 5; 16, 17; and 18, 19). In this way, the melody broadens its register rapidly in the first few measures of the theme. The melodic shape and contour also portray a consistently rising structure, climaxing on the highest pitch in the sixth measure of each eight-bar phrase (see measures 6 and 22, respectively). This allows for a slow rising action to the height of the phrase with a resolute conclusion—an effective means of musical rhetoric. Highly adorned with various figures and ornamentation, the principle tones of the melody receive emphasis on the strong beats with the written-out embellishments occurring near the end of each measure. Having a full comprehension of the innate qualities of the melody and the harmonic and bass support, it is now possible to distinguish the numerous avenues of orchestration Brahms implements through his process of deviating and returning to the original theme.

### III. PERFORMING FORCES

With six individual voices possible in the score, as well as opportunities for more voices by double-stopping and triple-stopping, Brahms utilizes the full breadth of his performing forces in this movement. He fully realizes his possibilities of pairing and opposing instruments and presenting the basic material through novel and unexpected turns. Aside from the third variation in which the two cellos share a perpetual motion of rapid scales, the second cello is singularly responsible for maintaining the ground foundation throughout the whole variation. In turn, the other instruments assume various roles of supporting harmony, melody, and countermelody. The part that each instrument holds is often subject to change within the appropriate variation, and sometimes within the measure.

A graphic analysis in TABLE 4.1 shows the numerous combinations that Brahms employs throughout the movement in rearranging the melodic and harmonic characters of the six individual voices. Following the melodic line throughout each variation and across the movement draws particular attention to the creativity that Brahms contributed to the scoring. Variation 3 presents a design that is unique within the movement because the melody is not stated in a recognizable form. The harmonic support is very

similar, however, and the flow from one variation to the next is not interrupted since the phrasing remains the same.

**TABLE 4.1:** Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii, Performing forces

		Part A			Part B		
Theme	Violin 1			M			M
	Violin 2						
	Viola 1	M			M		
	Viola 2			H			H
	Violoncello 1 Violoncello 2						
Variation 1	Violin 1						M
	Violin 2			M	H	H	
	Viola 1	H		M		M	H
	Viola 2		M				
	Violoncello 1 Violoncello 2	M		H	M	M	M
Variation 2	Violin 1			M			M
	Violin 2						
	Viola 1						
	Viola 2						H
	Violoncello 1 Violoncello 2	H			H		
Variation 3	Violin 1						
	Violin 2			H			
	Viola 1						
	Viola 2						
	Violoncello 1 Violoncello 2			S	H	S	H
Variation 4	Violin 1			M			
	Violin 2				CM		
	Viola 1			M			M
	Viola 2					CM	H
	Violoncello 1 Violoncello 2			CM		CM	H
Variation 5	Violin 1						
	Violin 2			CM		CM	
	Viola 1			M			M
	Viola 2					H	
	Violoncello 1 Violoncello 2					P	P
Coda Variation 6 (mm. 129-144)	Violin 1		P		P		
	Violin 2		P				M
	Viola 1			H	CM	H	CM
	Viola 2						H
	Violoncello 1 Violoncello 2			M		M	H
Coda (mm. 144-159)	Violin 1	M	M	M	H	M	M
	Violin 2						
	Viola 1					M	M
	Viola 2					M	M
	Violoncello 1 Violoncello 2	M	M			M	M

**Key:**

- CM: Countermelody
- H: Harmonic Support
- M: Melody (Principal role)
- P: Pizzicato Harmony
- S: Scales

***Pairs and groupings of instruments***

With six individual voices, Brahms typically uses pairings, and sometimes groups of instruments. With this approach, he creates an antiphonal discourse through the various choirs of voices. Certainly this was not a foreign concept to such an experienced choral conductor who composed this work shortly after

writing several songs for his women's chorus in Detmold.<sup>7</sup> He frequently pairs instruments when declaring the melody or countermelody. The pairings of voices strengthens the texture and provides a symphonic gesture within the confines of a work for chamber strings. The two violins are commonly paired, as melody in part A of variation 2 (mm. 49–56) and as counter melody in variation 5 (mm. 113–24). At times other instruments across the ensemble share similar roles, such as violin 1 and viola 1 in first part of variation 5 (mm. 113–20).

EXAMPLE 4.3: Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii, mm. 150–55

Perhaps the most accessible example of instrument pairing and grouping occurs in the coda, in measures 150–55, where violins and violas exchange the melody through elision every two measures (SEE EXAMPLE 4.3). The first cello also joins the violins in these measures, forming two opposing choirs of instruments while the second cello stays faithful to the harmonic progression necessary for bringing cohesion and closure to the work. Brahms utilizes these antiphonal pairings and overlapping phrases to endow the movement with a greater sense of unity.

<sup>7</sup>Swafford, p. 203. Brahms composed his Op. 44, Twelve Songs and Romances for four women's voices in 1859–60, during his tenure in Detmold, just before writing the Op. 18 B-flat major Sextet.

### *Unity and balance in the exchange of performing forces*

Another source of unity stems from the seamless exchange of role among the instruments. Brahms features each of the instruments, except the second cello, in melodic functions, and it is rare for the same instrument to carry the entire thematic function within a single variation (see variation 6, mm. 129–44). Not only does this compositional technique create a continuous thread for the movement, but it also adds balance by exchanging the principal melodic role throughout the ensemble. The conversation in variation 1 is the most transparent example of this principle in which each instrument maintains a part of the melody for one measure at a time (SEE EXAMPLE 4.4, mm. 36–40). By sharing a given part of the melodic line, the instruments must function as one unit, creating the aural effect that five voices have converged into a single instrument or character. This displays a balance of structure as well as orchestration and register: the low, middle, and high registers all have a contribution to give in the synthesis of harmony and melody.

EXAMPLE 4.4: Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii, mm. 36–40

Register plays a significant part in his orchestration of voices in this movement. The viola's introduction of the theme (mm. 1–8) brings a unique color to the opening. Later the first violin assumes the principal role (mm. 9–16), and by the end of the work, the first cello has the last statement of the

theme (mm. 129–44). By sharing the theme and its variations among the different registers and instruments, Brahms achieves numerous combinations of color and sound, giving the work a rich vocabulary of harmony and melody. It is within this texture of performing forces that he then overlays musical allusion to Baroque practice, providing means for innovation.

#### IV. BAROQUE ROOTS AND THE FOUNDATION OF DEVIATION

Of all the works to be discussed in this present study, the Andante from Brahms's Op. 18 B-flat major Sextet is the most heavily indebted to the Baroque tradition. Although Brahms projects his own style into the movement, it bears the signature of an older era. How he incorporates the harmonic content of the Baroque within a more organic formal design exemplifies the composer's ingenuity. It is therefore within the prototype of Baroque variation technique that he effectively stretches the limits of the genre through a broader, and more goal-directed, approach to musical discourse. There are several Baroque paradigms established and expanded upon, including the nature of the passacaglia, the *folia* theme, mode mixture, diminutions of rhythms, affections, and musical rhetoric. An understanding of the historical connotations of these characteristics reveals the movement's Baroque foundation and simultaneously offers insight into the ways Brahms deviated from the Baroque premise.

##### *Nature of the Passacaglia*

As previously discussed, the second movement of Op. 18 exhibits many of the properties of a *passacaglia*, due to its repeated ground bass pattern as established in the theme and the continuous set of variations that follow. Variation expert Robert U. Nelson cites five different nomenclatures that classify the basso ostinato variations of the Baroque period: (1) ground, (2) folia, (3) bergamask, (4) passacaglia, and (5) chaconne.<sup>8</sup> While the passacaglia and the chaconne are the standard terms typically used to

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<sup>8</sup>Robert U. Nelson, *The Technique of Variation: A Study of the Instrumental Variation from Antonio de Cabezón to Max Reger* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), pp. 66–7. As mentioned previously in reference to Silbiger's scholarly writing on the passacaglia and the chaconne, Nelson also notes that the passacaglia and the chaconne are very similar and in modern times are considered synonymous, apart from their different origins. In terms of the ground bass, it could refer to a variety of variations or bass lines that support a repeated pattern in the bass. Finally, Nelson references the historical dance roots of the bergamask (Italian) and the folia (Spanish). These are conceived from a specific harmonic progression obtained from those

describe a series of variations built on a repeated ground bass, the folia and the bergamask are unique types of ground bass variations because they derive their harmonic pattern from those respective dances (SEE FN 8). The particular harmonic scheme and basso ostinato found in Brahms's Andante carries an audible shadow of the historic *la folia* theme.<sup>9</sup> He constructs his theme with knowledge of these historical implications, yet he also bends the rigidity of the archaic theme through a number of techniques.

### *The Folia theme*

There are two types of folias, one that originated in Portugal in 1577, and one that originated in France in the 1760s.<sup>10</sup> The French folia is also known as the later folia. Although similar, it is the French folia that influences Brahms's own variation melody in the Sextet. The earliest written benchmark of the later folia appeared in 1672, in an *Air des hautbois* by J.B. Lully (1632–87).<sup>11</sup> The folia melody and basso ostinato later became increasingly popular among other composers, and several compositions based on the folia emerged, some of the more well-known being Corelli's *Sonate a violin e violone o cimbalò*, op. 5, no. 12 (1700) and J.S. Bach's *Bauernkantate*, BWV 212 (1742).<sup>12</sup> The first halves of both of these examples, along with Lully's original folia, are shown in EXAMPLE 4.5, along with the typical bass line and harmonic structure. Lully notated his original written version (1672) in the Dorian mode, and it is notable here that Brahms cast the present variation in D minor while simultaneously drawing upon modal inflections that were indigenous to the modal language.<sup>13</sup>

Such historic precedents provided the material Brahms employed in writing his variation theme based on the folia. Comparing these Baroque melodies with part A of the Brahms theme (SEE EXAMPLE 4.6) reveals the influences of the folia bass and harmony, and additionally, the intricacy of Brahms's

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dances. Regardless of the varying terminology, however, Nelson does indicate that some of these terms (aside from the dances), may be used interchangeably.

<sup>9</sup>Margaret Notley, "Sextet No. 1 for two violins, two violas, and two cellos in B-flat major, opus 18," in *The Complete Brahms: A Guide to the Musical Works of Johannes Brahms*, ed. Leon Botstein (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 143.

<sup>10</sup>Giuseppe Gerbino and Alexander Silbiger, "Folia," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/09929> (accessed May 20, 2012).

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Lawrence H. Moe, "Folia," in *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Don Michael Randel, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2003), p. 322. In J.S. Bach's *Bauernkantate*, or "Peasant Cantata," the aria that is based on the folia tune begins with the text, "Unser trefflicher lieber Kammerherr." The descriptive text for the title of the entire cantata is "Mer hahn en neue Oberkeet."

<sup>13</sup>While writing in a tonal framework, Brahms borrows from the pre-tonal harmonies common in the age of the folia melody.

rhythmic complexity. One conspicuous change is the use of duple rather than a triple meter. Julian Littlewood proposes that Brahms replaced the traditional triple meter, which historically suggests a dance-like character, to disassociate the work from the lighter rhythmic implications of triple meter.<sup>14</sup> In this way, Brahms creates a more somber character from the beginning. Furthermore, Littlewood contends that this allusion to the historic folia themes “is an archaicizing gesture rather than a springboard for merriment,” particularly due to the unrelenting quarter notes in the harmony and the regal duple meter found in the Brahms theme.<sup>15</sup>

EXAMPLE 4.5: Examples of folia melodies with bass line<sup>16</sup>

The musical score for Example 4.5 consists of four staves. The top three staves show the first half of the bass line for Lully (1672), Corelli (1700), and J.S. Bach (1742), all in 3/4 time. The bottom staff shows the bass line for the first half of the Brahms theme, also in 3/4 time. The figured bass notation below the staves is: d: i V i VII III VII i V.

EXAMPLE 4.6: Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii, part A, mm. 1–8, viola 1 and cello 2<sup>17</sup>

The musical score for Example 4.6 consists of two staves. The top staff is for viola 1 and the bottom staff is for cello 2, both in 2/4 time. The score includes dynamic markings (f) and figured bass notation: d: i V<sup>6</sup> i V<sup>6</sup>/VII VII III<sup>6</sup> iv III VI V.

To comprehend the common progression and bass line of the later folia and its connections to the present theme, it may be helpful to study a reduced prototype of the bass line and harmonic content (SEE

<sup>14</sup>Julian Littlewood, *The Variations of Johannes Brahms*, ed. Christopher Wintle (London: Plumbago Books, 2004), p. 146.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. Littlewood’s suggestion here seems to give an accurate interpretation of this aspect of the folia theme.

<sup>16</sup>This musical example has been adapted from Richard Hudson, “The Folia Melodies,” *Acta Musicologica* 45/1 (Jan.–Jun. 1973): p. 112.

<sup>17</sup>The viola part in this example has been transposed to treble clef here, for easier comparison with the treble melodies in EXAMPLE 4.6 above.

EXAMPLE 4.7). The later folia yields a simple 16-bar harmonic progression in the minor key. Just as in the Op. 18 theme, the A section moves steadily to the dominant, and the B section resolves in the tonic. By comparing the harmonies between this historic paradigm and Brahms's voicing (SEE EXAMPLES 4.6 AND 4.8), direct parallels can be seen in the overall tonal direction and the use of the VII and III harmonies. There are other aspects of the Op. 18 variation, however, that suggest a more innovative technique of the late nineteenth century.

EXAMPLE 4.7: The later folia: Soprano-Bass framework with harmonic analysis<sup>18</sup>

d:    i        V        i        VII    III        VII        i        V

i        V        i        VII    III        VII        i    V        i

EXAMPLE 4.8: Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii part B, mm. 17–24, viola 1 and cello<sup>19</sup>

d:    i        VII        V        I    V<sup>7</sup>/V    I<sup>6</sup> IV    V<sup>6/5</sup>/V    V        i

For example, Brahms's rhythmic counterpoint is one of the aspects of innovation that Brahms employs within the texture of the folia progression and bass line. He follows a common Baroque practice of treating the bass in stepwise motion, descending in measures 17 through 20, and chromatically ascending

<sup>18</sup>This musical example has been transposed from g minor and adapted from Richard Hudson, "The Folia Melodies," *Acta Musicologica* 45/1 (Jan.–Jun. 1973): p. 115.

<sup>19</sup>The viola part in this example has been transposed to treble clef here, for easier comparison with the soprano-bass framework in EXAMPLE 4.8 above.



in measures 21 through 22. On the other hand, rhythms and grace notes are much more complex than the Baroque melodies in EXAMPLE 4.5. Another example of Brahms's progressive rhythmic development is in measures 53 to 56 of variation 2 (SEE EXAMPLE 4.9). In these measures, the violins play duple meter against the triplets in the violas. The rhythms are thus extremely complex, demonstrating an intricacy of rhythm while the harmonic content is faithful to the folia progression.

EXAMPLE 4.9: Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii, mm. 53–56

Correlations between this nineteenth-century Andante and the later folia of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are thus readily apparent, but the composer's individual voice is paramount in the construction of the theme. He achieves his own folia-derived theme through an altered meter and a unique rhythmic complexity. Modal mixture is ubiquitous throughout the work, a prevalent feature in music of the Baroque. It is also a consistent trait in much of Brahms's music. Although the origins of altering the mode of a piece also occur before the nineteenth century, he develops a new aesthetic by embracing the harmonic language of the Baroque and combining these characteristics with complexity of rhythm. He therefore demonstrates an acknowledgement of the past and his innovative foresight into the future.

### *Modal Mixture*

Bach frequently utilized the so-called Picardy third at the end of his pieces,<sup>20</sup> and it was typical in the Classical era to include a *minore* variation within a theme and variation work in a major key, or vice

<sup>20</sup>Philip P. Jones and John Barnes, "Bach, and Werckmeister," *Early Music* 8/4 (Oct. 1980): p. 511.

versa, to include a *maggiore* in a minor-key movement or piece. Choosing to set a variation in the parallel major or minor key of the original theme was characteristic of both Haydn and Mozart, and also Beethoven, in many of their variation-based works.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Schubert generally presented a *minore* variation within a major-key work as well as a variation in the major-submediant (♭VI).<sup>22</sup> David Beach even postulates that modal mixture “[became] a hallmark of [Schubert’s] style,” appearing within phrases and bestowing surface, as well as deep structural, value to the work.<sup>23</sup> Brahms therefore had many precedents to study in forming his own approach to harmony. In many ways, the modal mixture that Beach describes as indigenous to Schubert’s music is also inherent in Brahms’s tonal harmony.

Brahms does set two of his variations, variations 4 and 5, in the *maggiore*, a conventional practice as observed in works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. On the other hand, what is most interesting is his juxtaposition of these opposing modes within the same variation, resulting in the modal mixture that Beach describes in Schubert’s music. Such shifts of the major and minor mode introduce harmonic ambiguity to work. As in the analysis of Schubert’s music, borrowed harmonies here function at surface levels as well as deep structural levels. For example, the initial presentation of the theme is largely in D minor. Nevertheless, traces of the major scale emerge in part B of the theme (SEE TABLE 4.2; MODAL MIXTURE HARMONIES APPEAR IN RED) with major tonic and subdominant harmonies. These brief appearances foreshadow deeper modal juxtapositions to follow. Even in variations 4 and 5, the structural *maggiore* sections of the piece, hints of the minor mode appear at least every eight measures, all the more, within the same measure in part B of the theme (see measures 97, 105, and 121). While Brahms indicates

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<sup>21</sup>Elaine Sisman, *Haydn and the Classical Variation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 162–3; 210. Sisman gives more detail on the treatment of these *minore* (or *maggiore*) variations as well as statistical data on the prevalence of these variations occurring in the opposite mode of the theme.

<sup>22</sup>Perry, “The Wanderer’s Many Returns: Schubert’s Variations Reconsidered,” pp. 415–6. Perry emphasized the ♭VI variation as representative of the originality of Schubert’s style, whereas the *minore* variation was assumed and accepted as the expected early nineteenth-century approach to variation technique.

<sup>23</sup>David W. Beach and Franz Schubert, “Modal Mixture and Schubert’s Harmonic Practice,” *Journal of Music Theory* 42/1 (Spring 1998): p. 99. Using the terminology, *modal mixture*, Beach is referring to a major composition borrowing harmonies or elements from the parallel minor mode, and vice versa (see p. 73).

TABLE 4.2: Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii, Modal shifts

	Part A	Part B
Theme (mm. 1–32)	mm. 1–8	mm. 17–24
	d: i V <sup>6</sup> i V <sup>6</sup> /VII VII III <sup>6</sup> iv III VI V	i VII V I V <sup>7</sup> /V I <sup>6</sup> IV V <sup>6/5</sup> /V V <sup>6-5</sup> <sub>4-3</sub> i
	mm. 9–16	mm. 25–32
Variation 1 (mm. 33–48)	d: i V <sup>6</sup> i V <sup>6</sup> /VII VII III <sup>6</sup> iv III VI V	i VII V I V <sup>7</sup> /V I <sup>6</sup> IV V <sup>6/5</sup> /V V <sup>6-5</sup> <sub>4-3</sub> i
	mm. 33–40	mm. 41–48
Variation 2 (mm. 49–64)	d: i V <sup>6</sup> I V <sup>6</sup> /VII VII III vii <sup>♭6</sup> /III III iv <sup>6</sup> V	i VII V V <sup>7</sup> /iv V <sup>7</sup> /V V <sup>6/5</sup> /iv vii <sup>♭7</sup> /V V <sup>6-5</sup> <sub>4-3</sub> i
	mm. 49–56	mm. 57–64
Variation 3 (mm. 65–80)	d: i V <sup>6</sup> i vii <sup>♭4/2</sup> /N vii <sup>♭7</sup> /iv IV i <sup>4/3</sup> IV <sup>4/3</sup> III ii <sup>♭4/3</sup> V	i VII V V <sup>7</sup> /iv V <sup>7</sup> /V V <sup>6/5</sup> /iv V <sup>6/5</sup> /V V <sup>6-5</sup> <sub>4-3</sub> i
	mm. 65–72	mm. 73–80
Variation 4 (mm. 81–112)	d: i (iv) I IV V <sup>6</sup> /VII III <sup>6</sup> V <sup>6</sup> /VII III V/IV V	i VII I V <sup>7</sup> /V V <sup>6/5</sup> /iv V <sup>6/5</sup> /V V <sup>7</sup> i
	mm. 81–88	mm. 97–104
	D: I V <sup>6/5</sup> I IV vii <sup>♭</sup> V <sup>7</sup> i <sup>6</sup> V/IV V	I (fi) V/fii III Fr <sup>4/3</sup> I V <sup>7</sup> /IV IV ii <sup>6</sup> V <sup>6-5</sup> <sub>4-3</sub> I
Variation 5 (mm. 113–128)	mm. 89–96	mm. 105–112
	D: I V <sup>6/5</sup> I V <sup>7</sup> /IV IV vii <sup>♭</sup> V <sup>7</sup> I <sup>6</sup> i <sup>6</sup> V/IV V	I (fi) V/fii III I V <sup>7</sup> /IV IV ii <sup>6</sup> V <sup>6-5</sup> <sub>4-3</sub> i
Variation 6 (mm. 129–159)	mm. 113–120	mm. 121–128
	D: I ii I IV vii <sup>♭</sup> I vii <sup>♭</sup> I i V <sup>7</sup>	I (fi) VII IV V <sup>6-5</sup> <sub>4-3</sub> (I) V <sup>7</sup> /IV IV iv I
	D pedal.....	
Coda (Variation 6) (mm. 129–159)	mm. 129–136	mm. 137–144
	d: i V <sup>6</sup> i IV <sup>6</sup> V/VII V ii <sup>♭6</sup> III V	i VII V I <sup>6</sup> IV V <sup>6-5</sup> <sub>4-3</sub> i
	mm. 145–159	
(d): I I V <sup>6-5</sup> <sub>4-3</sub>	V V <sup>6-5</sup> <sub>4-3</sub> I	

a clear tonal structure through his *maggiore* key signature, ambiguity results from his continual alternations of mode within the same phrase.<sup>24</sup>

While the partial sixth variation begins in the original minor tonic in measure 129, Brahms does not remain in the minor key for long. Allusions to the parallel major key occur in part A (m. 132) with the major subdominant. Likewise, the same mixture chords that were introduced in the original theme recur in part B (mm. 141–2). Brahms takes an intriguing turn at this point with a cadence in the major key (m. 144). The coda material then ensues, and Brahms remains in D major through the end of the movement. Thus, this theme and variation opens in D minor and closes in D major. The modal shift is organic, stemming from the borrowing that occurred within the preceding variations. The surface borrowing ultimately directed the deeper structural shift of mode from minor to major.

Brief suggestions of modal mixture appear in variations 2 and 3, the most significant being the perpetual alternation of major and parallel minor scales as stated by the two cellos (SEE EXAMPLE 4.10).<sup>25</sup> From a modal perspective, this is simply the inflection of tones, implementing the entire spectrum of the mode. On the other hand, from a twentieth-century perspective, these scales follow one after another, and the dichotomy of major and minor becomes a regular occurrence within the third variation. Strategically placed in the middle of the movement, the third variation demonstrates a direct juxtaposition of parallel modal shifts. Brahms's use of major and minor modes affects the piece at local levels through the rich harmonies and variations, and at broad structural levels through his intentional shifts and overall harmonic direction.

**EXAMPLE 4.10:** Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii, third variation, mm. 67, 68, cello 2

67

G major                      G harmonic minor                      G major                      G natural minor/chromatic

<sup>24</sup>Brahms's use of modal mixture here reaches deeper than the so called Picardy third, in which the composer would shift the final cadence to the major mode in a predominantly minor work. Brahms's modal mixture draws from the rich language of the Baroque, continually exploring the inflections of tone through the concept of modality.

<sup>25</sup>In speaking about major and minor scales, I understand that this language stems from theoretical conversations of the twentieth century, whereas pre-tonal language treats these alternations of tone as inflections common to the designated mode. It is valuable to view these changes as inflections of tone, reflecting the historical roots of Brahms's approach to variation here.

### *Diminutions of Rhythms*

The third variation also offers a second type of climax in terms of rhythmic density. Driven by continuous thirty-second notes in the bass, these scales represent the most compact rhythmic diminution in the movement. Littlewood presents a chart of progressive subdivision moving from the theme to the third variation.<sup>26</sup> In the chart, he details the units of rhythmic division from basic quarter notes in the theme, eighth notes in the repeat of the theme, sixteenth notes in variation 1, sixteenth-note sextuplets in variation 2, and finally, thirty-second notes in variation 3.<sup>27</sup> Following variation 3, the rhythms are less ordered according to the previous paradigm, and the diminutions appear more freely. Subdividing the rhythms of a theme into smaller and smaller note values by diminution was a common practice of the Baroque era.<sup>28</sup> By dividing the note values into faster and faster rhythms, Brahms was therefore embracing this tradition. Since the rhythms do not follow the same design after variation 3, however, he was able to acknowledge the past practice while forging his own style in the conclusion of the movement.

Margaret Notley discusses his rhythm in which he moves from a strict progression followed immediately by a freer approach. Comparing the composer's treatment of Baroque style in an earlier work, the B-major Piano Trio, op. 8, Notley makes the following observations about the treatment of Baroque elements in the Sextet:

Brahms integrated references to the extraneous style much more successfully in the Sextet by making the collision of discourses the point of the movement, by forming the set of variations around the very opposition between latter-day subjectivity and monumental, impersonal quality of both the Baroque theme and the technique of divisions. Idioms that sound somewhat out of place in Baroque style intrude in the second and third variations. The climax of the movement comes at the end of the third variation; tension is released, and identifiably Baroque features disappear altogether in the *maggiore* fourth and fifth variations. When the theme returns after the final variation, this moment juxtaposes minor with major, Baroque with nineteenth-century discourses; the coda synthesizes the two styles.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Littlewood, pp. 146–7.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Greer Garden and Robert Donington, "Diminution," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/42071> (accessed May 22, 2012).

<sup>29</sup>Notley, "Sextet No. 1 for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Two Cellos in B $\flat$  Major, Opus 18," in *The Complete Brahms*, pp. 143–4.

Notley thus argues that the contrasting Baroque and nineteenth-century elements are the essence of this movement, in which the two styles are eventually reconciled. This could also apply to other disparate features within the theme and variation: major versus minor tonalities and the *folia* harmonic progression versus Brahms's deviation. The presentation of conflict and resolution, particularly in terms of Baroque and nineteenth-century characteristics, becomes a rich source of thematic and harmonic material for the composer. Above, Notley also submits the idea of a "collision of discourses," suggesting a deeper aesthetic principle that results from Brahms's juxtaposition of dissimilar entities. These extra-musical associations will be the final topic of discussion, regarding traits very familiar to composers of the Baroque era: the affections and musical rhetoric.

### *Affections and Musical Rhetoric*

Following in the footsteps of his Baroque predecessors, Brahms draws upon the idea of musical affects, thought to bring the listener to a heightened emotional state. It was in the seventeenth century that the musical figures began to be closely tied to the text, with musical rhetorical figures.<sup>30</sup> A variety of factors with regard to mode, meter, figures of musical rhetoric, and others could influence the intended affect that the composer sought to portray.<sup>31</sup> Expressing music through rhetorical means meant that composers, particularly those in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, would often seek to characterize a single affect, or emotion, within a movement or work.<sup>32</sup> The second movement of Brahms's Op. 18 Sextet appears to reflect such goals within each variation, but through a more organic design.

Brahms composed his music during a period that embraced a more complex view of the emotions than did his predecessors in the Baroque. Rather than sectionalizing the emotions into objective experiences, romantics frequently embraced a large gamut of feelings, often accepting the highs and lows of emotional experience simultaneously. It would seem likely, then, that Brahms's approach to musical

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<sup>30</sup>Dietrich Bartel, *Musica Poetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), pp. 31–2.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 40–50.

<sup>32</sup>George J. Buelow, "Affects, theory of the," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/00253> (accessed May 22, 2012).

affects and rhetorical devices would portray a more intricate design, presenting several affects throughout the whole movement (SEE TABLE 4.3).

**TABLE 4.3:** Brahms Sextet, op. 18/ii, Musical affects

	<b>Affect</b>
<b>Theme</b>	Solo instrument accompanied by incessant pulse
<b>Variation 1</b>	“Dovetail” interplay of voices in sixteenth note figures
<b>Variation 2</b>	Sextuplets and emphasis on repeated notes and arpeggios
<b>Variation 3</b>	Running scales in the bass; emphasis on the second half of every measure
<b>Variation 4</b>	Hymn-like, slower rhythms
<b>Variation 5</b>	Sixteenth-note variation melody with chimes in the upper strings
<b>Coda (Variation 6)</b>	Return of the Theme (Solo instrument with light pizzicato accompaniment)

Here, through the use of various rhetorical devices, the variations express a multitude of musical affects. Since the music is without text, one can only imagine the various moods and emotions that the composition evokes. With each variation, the listener enters a complex aesthetic. This continuous, organic approach to the idea of musical affects is one example of blending disparate types of rhetoric, just as Notley expressed regarding Brahms’s success in reconciling opposing discourses, of both the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Against the background of the rich harmonic vocabulary of the Baroque, Brahms asserts his own voice through both an intricate approach to rhythm and a discursive rhetoric.

## V. HISTORICAL ROOTS AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY PRACTICE

In his Op. 18 Sextet, Brahms is steeped in the historical tradition, yet he still achieves his own voice in unique ways through his slight variance and attempts to stretch the boundaries of the patterns and designs he establishes from the beginning. His application of the Baroque practice is clearly achieved, and yet his own nineteenth-century approach to the genre is just as convincing. This Sextet represents a springboard from which Brahms acknowledges the rich history of the theme and variation technique, and at the same time, he begins to assert his own voice. He does not deconstruct the structural and harmonic

paradigms set forth at the beginning, but rather, he extends and expands the margins, expressing romantic ideals within a Baroque framework.

In this way, Brahms incorporates a historic aesthetic within his own compositional language. By using a recurrent harmonic scheme, modal mixture, and an innovative rhythmic counterpoint, he blends the harmonic language of both eras. Formally, Brahms sets strict eighteenth-century formal divisions and repeats for the variations, yet he blurs those boundaries to create a more organic progression in the coda. His performing forces allow for great contrapuntal innovation alongside homophonic textures and pairing of instrument voices to produce increasing lyricism. This work embodies the metaphor of Brahms as the Janus figure, both forward-looking and backward-looking. His Sextet in B-flat major, op. 18, reflects the composer's early style and approach to theme and variation through his fluent juxtaposition of Baroque and nineteenth-century aesthetics within a cohesive scheme of tonal color and musical rhetoric.



## Chapter 5: A Polyphonic Variation: Brahms's Sextet in G major, Op. 36

One could assume that a study of the Opus 36 String Sextet in G major, composed between 1864 and 1865, would offer a striking comparison to its antecedent in the same genre, the Sextet in B-flat major, op. 18 (composed 1859/60; see chapter 4). Since both contain a slow movement in theme and variation form within their inner movements (op. 18/ii; op. 36/iii), a close comparison is inevitable. As mentioned previously, the second sextet was one of the last pieces classified in Brahms's first maturity (1859–65), while the first was one of the initial pieces composed in this period.<sup>1</sup> Both predate the composition of his first string quartet as well as his first symphony.<sup>2</sup>

When studied together, the second of the two sextets demonstrates a giant leap in Brahms's approach to theme and variation, introducing a new conception of the theme and its subsequent treatment. Whereas the second movement of the Opus 18 Sextet was formulaic in terms of Baroque structures and tendencies, the Adagio (iii) of the Opus 36 Sextet begins with an ambiguity foreign to the Baroque and Classical eras in which the theme is barely recognizable as such. Indeed, the nineteenth-century music critic Eduard Hanslick referred to this movement as “a kind of free variation on *no* theme.”<sup>3</sup> Despite his contemporary's disapproval of the movement, Brahms *does* utilize a theme, but his theme is much more complex than a simple melody and accompaniment. Instead, his theme involves layers of thematic and motivic material that alternate between foreground and background levels, creating a polyphonic theme and variation.

The following paragraphs will demonstrate the concept of Brahms's polyphonic treatment of theme and variation through an outline of the formal and harmonic design in the Op. 36 Adagio. Subsequently, illustrations will be provided to show how the layers of motivic material influence the movement's design and melodic content from the initial theme to the coda. Specific examples will be

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<sup>1</sup>See Webster, “Schubert's Sonata Form and Brahms's First Maturity (II),” pp. 54–5.

<sup>2</sup>Here, I refer to the first published string quartets (Op. 51/1873) and his Symphony No. 1 in C minor (Op. 68/1877). It is reported that Brahms wrote many string quartets but destroyed them prior to publishing the Op. 51 quartets in 1873. For more regarding his prior string quartets, see Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*, pp. 216; 383–4.

<sup>3</sup>Eduard Hanslick, “Aus dem Konzertsaal,” cited by Max Kalbeck, *Brahms II*, p. 161, quoted by Sisman, “Brahms and the Variation Canon, p. 150.

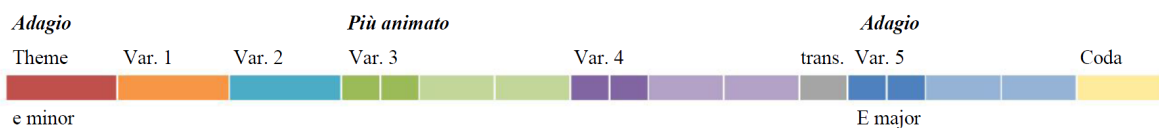
given throughout the variations to show Brahms's integrative technique in using secondary and tertiary elements of the theme to assume leading roles in the variations.

## I. FORMAL DESIGN

The Adagio of the second sextet includes a theme with five discrete variations and a coda. The theme and its variations are cast in units of twelve measures each, often divided harmonically and thematically by three 4-bar phases, and typically grouped in an overall 4+8 construction. There are a few changes of tempo throughout the movement: the theme and first and second variations function within the initial *adagio*, and the third and fourth variations are much quicker, set during the *più animato*. Finally, the fifth variation and the coda return to a second *adagio*, indicated by  $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ .

Variations 3, 4, and 5 have structural repeats of the first four bars and another repeat in the last eight bars. On a temporal level, because of the faster tempo in variations 3 and 4, the first four variations are mostly equivalent in length of time, while the fifth variation is over three times as long as any of the preceding variations, due to the repeats and its *adagio* tempo.<sup>4</sup> The movement begins in E minor with continual fluctuations between the minor key and its parallel major, until the key signature shifts to E major in variation 5, preceded by a five-measure transition (SEE FIGURE 5.1). The transition interrupts the consecutive flow of variations, but its content, to be discussed below, is organic since it draws from the movement's motivic material.

**FIGURE 5.1:** Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, Broad formal scheme



At the tempo change in variation 3, the instruments enter independently in a *fugato*. The second cello leads the first statement of the fugato subject in measure 37, followed by the second viola, the first

<sup>4</sup>See Littlewood, *The Variations of Johannes Brahms*, pp. 155–8. In these pages, Littlewood provides bar graphs of the various performance timings of the variations. He emphasizes the increased length of the fifth variation and provides extensive discussion.

cello, and eventually all of the instruments join (SEE EXAMPLE 5.1). This short motive is treated in stretto as each instrument enters while others are still completing their statement of the subject. Brahms also uses dominant to tonic pitch levels for each entrance (SEE FIGURE 5.2), two statements in B, two in E, three in A, and a final statement in D. This moves the fugato throughout a progression based on the circle of fifths, eventually with a half cadence in E major. While his fugato here is not a strict eighteenth-century counterpoint treatment of fugue, it does hearken back to the compositional devices reminiscent of the Baroque era, a representation of the dexterity of Brahms's compositional technique as well as a fossil of the Baroque traditions and the history of theme and variation. The loose treatment of the subject and the extensive use of stretto reconcile this short fugato to the composer's nineteenth-century style.

EXAMPLE 5.1: Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, mm. 37–40, fugato and stretto

FIGURE 5.2: Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, mm 37–40, Pitch-level in stretto and fugato entrances

	Measure 37	Measure 38	Measure 39	Measure 40
Violin 1				D
Violin 2			A	
Viola 1		E		
Viola 2	B		A	
Cello 1		E		
Cello 2	B		A	

Variation 4 then follows with a type of melodic inversion of variation 3, in which the ascending octave-leap is reversed to a descending octave, and the motivic entrances are treated even more loosely.

These tempo changes and structural signposts have a bearing on the organization of the movement. In addition to tempo indication and compositional devices, the harmonic content of the theme also provides an underlying structure that grounds the basic form of the variations and also shapes the Adagio's internal progression.

## II. HARMONIC CONTENT

In regards to harmony, three distinct characteristics form the basis of harmonic activity within this movement: (1) the role of the bass, (2) the recurrence of pedal tones, and (3) modal mixture between E minor and E major. Elaine Sisman frequently focuses on the role of the bass in her studies on Brahms's theme and variations.<sup>5</sup> She recognizes the absence of cello parts during the theme, and essentially, the foundational absence of a bass structure. In the theme, the violas function as the lowest range within the ensemble, but it is notable that the bass instruments in the ensemble are missing here, especially retrospectively when they enter at the beginning of the first variation in measure 13. Sisman describes the missing bass register and its implications on the rest of the movement:

The empty bass register in the theme, however, has profound consequences: it means that Brahms must literally discover the bass in the melody instead of the other way round. In fact, Brahms reinvents the bass in every variation.<sup>6</sup>

In this way, the bass assumes a pivotal role within each variation. At times it provides the harmonic foundation (variations 1 and 2), and at other moments, it leads the melodic or motivic activity (variation 3). The bass also functions in an ambiguous role by introducing progressive harmonies or inflections of tone (variation 4). The second cello is no longer confined to a strict basso ostinato that holds the

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<sup>5</sup>See Sisman, "Brahms and the Variation Canon," pp. 132–53. In this article, Sisman traces the role of the bass in several of Brahms's variations, including Op. 36 and Op. 111. She bases her argument on research from Brahms's letters to various colleagues on the topic of theme and variations. One particular quote that guides much of her discussion was a letter that Brahms wrote to Adolf Schubring in 1869, in which Brahms writes, "In a theme for [a set of] variations, it is almost only the bass that *actually* [*eigentlich*] has any meaning for me. But this is sacred to me, it is the firm foundation on which I then build my stories [*die feste Grund, auf dem ich dann meine Geschichten baue*]" (p. 134).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p. 150.

movement together, as in Op. 18. Perhaps the absence of cellos in the theme allows Brahms to free the lower voices to function in a variety of characters, enabling middle voices to share the harmonic support usually held primarily by the bass. The consistent use of pedal tones is a prime example of this concept of giving other instruments roles normally carried by the bass, and subsequently, blurring the roles of register between the instruments.

A recurring pedal tone on F-sharp is evident in the theme and in each of the variations. Within the 12-bar unit of variation, the F-sharp pedal occurs consistently during the inner four measures. This constitutes measures 5–8 of the theme and the respective measures within the following variations (SEE TABLE 5.1). The second cello is not the sole carrier of this pedal, as several instruments share the role throughout the movement: first viola in the theme, second cello in variation 1 and 2, both cellos in variation 3, both violas in variation 4, and both cellos again in variation 5. Even when the pedal is found in the cello parts, it is presented in a loose motivic approach, as in measures 41 and 42 of variation 3, a shorter pedal that allows for freer parts in the bass. The harmonic foundation is thus shared between the varying registers of the ensemble.

**TABLE 5.1:** Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, Harmonic diagram

<b>Theme</b> mm. 1–12 e minor	1	–	4	5	–	12
						V–I
						F# pedal
<b>Variation 1</b> mm. 13–24 e minor	13	–	16	17	–	24
						V–I <sup>6/4</sup>
						F# pedal
<b>Variation 2</b> mm. 25–28 e minor	25	–	28	29	–	36
						I
						F# pedal
<b>Variation 3</b> mm. 37–48 e minor	37	–	40	41	–	48
						V <sup>6</sup>
						V–I
						F# pedal
<b>Variation 4</b> mm. 49–60 e minor	49	–	52	53	–	60
						iv <sup>6</sup> –V
						V–i
						F# pedal
<b>Transition</b> mm. 61–65	61	–	65			
						V
<b>Variation 5</b> mm. 66–77 E Major	66	–	69	70	–	77
						V
						N <sup>6</sup> –V
						F# pedal
<b>Coda</b> mm. 78–87 E Major	78					87
						V–I
						E pedal

As a recurring pedal, this regular prolongation of F-sharp influences the structure of each variation significantly. It parses the 12-measure unit into three 4-bar units. Brahms's continuous application of this pedal throughout the entirety of the movement is a representation of his strict treatment of the theme. In responding to Hanslick's earlier comment that the Op. 36 Adagio was devoid of a theme, Ivor Keys contends that the variations *do* have a strict design "to the extent that Brahms feels no need to hammer home the theme."<sup>7</sup> Instead, he retains the harmonic framework of the theme. The methodical approach to pedals in regards to a recurrent harmonic structure is another shadow of the formal historic tradition.

F-sharp is the V/V, or the dominant of B major. This is significant to the overall formal design because B major harmonies typically follow the F-sharp pedal at the end of each variation. The dominant ultimately leads to the tonic, and the pedal in the coda occurs on the tonic pitch of E, remaining until the close of the movement. The strategic use of his pedals underlines crucial structural tones in the movement, including the tonic in the coda, and F-sharp, the dominant of the dominant, foreshadowing the importance of B major. These fundamental tones and harmonies then underscore modal variety that Brahms juxtaposes within and across the variations.

The key signatures throughout the movement reflect clarity by remaining in E minor in variations 1 through 4, including the transition, and shifting to E major in variation 5 to the end. The internal harmonic content, however, is much more ambiguous. As a profound characteristic seen in the Op. 18 Sextet, Brahms frequently pairs major tonalities with their corresponding parallel minor tonalities as a technique of modal mixture. At the endings of variations Brahms typically borrows from the major tonic, and only one of the variations (variation 4) ends in the minor tonality. Within the various phrases, he will typically inflect tones to immediately follow a major tonality with a minor one, or vice versa. The beginning of variation 4 presents one example of this process by inflecting the G-sharp and G-natural in the second viola and the D-sharp and D-natural in the first cello, resulting in G-sharp diminished/G major and B major/minor harmonies, respectively (SEE EXAMPLE 5.2). These occur in such close succession that

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<sup>7</sup>Keys, *Johannes Brahms*, p. 208.

the harmony is unstable. Another instance of this aspect of his style can be seen in measures 30–32 of variation 2, in which the harmonies above underlying F-sharp pedal shift from F-sharp minor to F-sharp major in measure 32.

EXAMPLE 5.2: Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, m. 49

The musical score for Example 5.2 shows six staves of music in 3/4 time, key of F# major. The first staff (Violin I) has a rest in the first measure, followed by a quarter note F# in the second measure, and a quarter note G# in the third measure. The second staff (Violin II) has a quarter note F# in the first measure, followed by a quarter note G# in the second measure, and a quarter note A in the third measure. The third staff (Viola I) has a quarter note F# in the first measure, followed by a quarter note G# in the second measure, and a quarter note A in the third measure. The fourth staff (Viola II) has a quarter note F# in the first measure, followed by a quarter note G# in the second measure, and a quarter note A in the third measure. The fifth staff (Cello I) has a quarter note F# in the first measure, followed by a quarter note G# in the second measure, and a quarter note A in the third measure. The sixth staff (Cello II) has a quarter note F# in the first measure, followed by a quarter note G# in the second measure, and a quarter note A in the third measure. Dynamics include 'f' (forte) markings.

As the pedal is sustained in various registers throughout the ensemble, harmonic ambiguity also results from modal juxtaposition. Likewise, the entire conceptual framework of the Op. 36 Sextet can be studied according to how the standard roles of voices become less distinct, and how the general assumptions about the technique of theme and variation are questioned. In Brahms's second sextet, the components of the theme function at complex levels, creating a fluid interchange between thematic ideas, motivic material, and harmonic content. As he blurs the lines between these distinct elements, he achieves a polyphonic approach that seeks to vary the theme at multiple levels.

### III. OPUS 36 AS A POLYPHONIC VARIATION

There are many underlying and simultaneous motives found within the first 12 measures that create the content of the theme, and while some, such as the first violin melody, appear at first to rise above the rest, the other parts have a vital influence on the variations to follow. The essence of this theme lies in the multi-layers that alternate between primary and supporting roles. Studying a similar idea of the

theme as found in Mozart's String Quartet in C major, K. 465 ("The Dissonant"), Mark Evan Bonds cites the writings of an earlier theorist, Friedrich Marpurg (1718–1795), discussing the *Hauptsatz* of a theme, what he refers to as the musical idea "that projects slightly above the rest."<sup>8</sup> When varying the *Hauptsatz*, Marpurg considers the unity that results from a work with a central theme, and he also remarks on the relationship of primary and secondary themes:

The passages that arise in different fashions from these processes [variations and manipulations of the *Hauptsatz*] serve to preserve the unity of the musical work. If one alternates the *Hauptsatz*, or the ideas that flow out of it, with a new secondary idea, according to an established, rational plan, and if one manipulates this secondary idea in the same manner as the earlier one, within appropriate proportions—there arises from this connection of the *Hauptsatz* with the secondary idea (as well as of the respective sections arising out of these ideas, which are, so to speak, so many new movements [*Sätze*] in their own way) the variety of a musical work.<sup>9</sup>

Bonds then uses these ideas about the *Hauptsatz*, the unity it provides when subsequently varied, and the role of secondary themes in analyzing the first movement of the Mozart K. 465 String Quartet. He applies these principles and gives the following assessment of the work:

The theme or the *Hauptsatz* of the first movement is not a single melodic line, but the polyphonic network of all four voices at the beginning of the introduction. The pitches, rhythms, and harmonies of these opening measures all figure in the subsequent course of the movement. Thus the form of this movement cannot be explained solely on the basis of any one of these instrumental lines or any one of these elements in isolation, but only through their coordination. What follows these opening measures can be interpreted either as derivatives or counterideas to the *Hauptsatz*—or as a fulfillment of both functions at one and the same time, as is in fact most often the case.<sup>10</sup>

Brahms used a similar approach to that of Mozart in handling the *Hauptsatz* in his theme. As the variations unfold, the original idea that was primary in the theme (as played by violin 1) fades into the background occasionally as other motivic devices become more prominent. Examples of such interchange of motivic material will be shown in the following discussion. These characteristics support a polyphonic texture and interpretation of the theme.

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<sup>8</sup>Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Kritishe Briefe uber die Tonkunst*, no. 85 (7 November 1761), p. 161, quoted in Mark Evan Bonds, *Wordless Rhetoric: Musical Form and the Metaphor of the Oration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 99.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Mark Evan Bonds, *Wordless Rhetoric: Musical Form and the Metaphor of the Oration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 102.



Elaine Sisman offers yet another perspective regarding the particular theme in the Op. 36 Sextet. Sisman suggests that the Adagio could be considered both a strict variation and a fantasy variation.<sup>11</sup> From studying various nineteenth-century writings by theorists and critics, she describes fantasy variations as “extensive alterations in structure, meter, and tempo of the theme while retaining its melody or motives.”<sup>12</sup> In some instances, a fantasy variation will depart considerably from the original content of the theme, losing the continuity of the variation. Interestingly, in his writings, Brahms was quite opposed to these types of “fantasy-variations,” considering such types as a separate form, apart from the variation form of which he was most fond. In contemplating the two variation forms, Brahms wrote the following in 1876 in a letter to his colleague, Heinrich von Herzogenberg:<sup>13</sup>

...Then I would perhaps go on about variations in general, and that I would wish people would distinguish between the title Variations and something else, possibly Fantasy-Variations, or however we would otherwise want to call almost all the newer variation works. I have a singular affection for the variation form, and believe that this form still compels our talent and ability.<sup>14</sup>

This letter was written over ten years after Brahms composed the Op. 36 Sextet, and it gives insights into the composer’s later thoughts regarding the fantasy variation, or the process varying a theme by excessive change while retaining individual motives. While Brahms was generally opposed to this type of variation and did not consider it a part of variation form, Sisman proposes the dual interpretation of this work as being both faithful to the traditional variation form, and simultaneously, displaying fantasy-like characteristics through its expression of the theme. She describes the Op. 36 Adagio as a “strict treatment of a free theme.”<sup>15</sup>

The approach Bonds takes in viewing the theme of Mozart’s “Dissonant” Quartet as a polyphonic texture is similar to Sisman’s analysis of Brahms’s Op. 36 Sextet. Both are presenting different

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<sup>11</sup>Sisman, “Brahms and the Variation Canon,” pp. 150–1.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup>Heinrich von Herzogenberg was an Austrian composer and contemporary of Brahms who shared many of the same interests, such as an admiration for Bach and other past composers. He maintained a lifelong friendship with Brahms and was greatly influenced by his works. Herzogenberg was considered to be “one of the most distinguished composers from the circle of conservative Berlin academics.” See Othmar Wessely and Bernd Wiechert. “Herzogenberg, Heinrich, Freiherr von,” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/12921> (accessed May 27, 2012).

<sup>14</sup>Johannes Brahms, *Briefwechsel*, vol. I, ed. Max Kalbeck (Berlin, 1907), pp. 7–8, (20 August 1876), quoted by Sisman, “Brahms and the Variation Canon,” p. 135.

<sup>15</sup>Sisman, “Brahms and the Variation Canon,” p. 151.

perspectives on an analogous idea: a theme containing multiple levels in which subsequent musical ideas can “flow” from the *entire* content of the theme, as Marpurg described. Whether that phenomenon is described as a theme with polyphonic characteristics or a “strict treatment of a free theme” is less important than comprehending the underlying concepts that characterize this sort of polyphonic variation: the multi-layers in the theme enable Brahms to borrow traits from both historical variation forms and nineteenth-century models of fantasy variations. But what constitutes a “free theme?” Perhaps Sisman is referring to the texture of independent voices and motives which can all be traced throughout the work while maintaining the individuality of each voice.

#### IV. THE THEME AND ITS MOTIVIC MATERIAL

The theme in Brahms’s second sextet had an earlier history than the sextet itself. Its first few bars appeared in a letter that he wrote to Clara Schumann in February of 1855, in which he describes it as “the Adagio from the Quartet,”<sup>16</sup> suggesting that these ideas would be a part of his new quartet. The quartet he mentioned then did not survive, as common to many of the composer’s early works, but the initial ideas from its theme did manifest themselves in a work composed about ten years later, consequently, the Op. 36 Sextet. The excerpt included in the letter is reproduced below (EXAMPLE 5.3):

EXAMPLE 5.3: Excerpt in letter to Clara Schumann, dated February 7, 1855<sup>17</sup>



Correlations between Brahms’s sketch of the 1855 string quartet Adagio and the opening theme of the Adagio of the second sextet (SEE EXAMPLE 5.4) are clearly evident, even with only two measures. The

<sup>16</sup>Quoted by Henry Sandwith Drinker, *Chamber Music of Johannes Brahms*. (Philadelphia: Press of Allen, Lane & Scott, 1932), p. 63. See also Sisman, “Brahms and the Variation Canon,” p. 150 and footnote 61. She indicates that this excerpt of the theme appeared two months earlier, on December 24<sup>th</sup> of 1854, in a small pocket notebook. In the notebook, he dedicated the tune to Clara, describing it as a “song or melody instead of words,” and that “it says, as always, more than my words [Lied oder eine Melodie statt Worte....Es sagt immer mehr als meine Worte].” Translation is my own from Sisman’s quotation of the notebook that resides in the Stadtbibliothek, Vienna.

<sup>17</sup>Excerpt reproduced and quoted from Berthold Litzmann, ed. *Letters of Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms: 1853–1896*. Vol. 1 (New York: Vienna House, 1927), p. 28.

long germinal process of the theme's composition and its incorporation into a larger work indicates that Brahms greatly valued its melody and harmonic implications, to have patiently kept it over the years, eventually working it into the third movement of his second sextet.

Many of the salient characteristics of the theme have already been introduced, such as the absence of the bass register, the multi-layers of motivic content, a free theme with polyphonic implications, strict variations, ambiguity through modal mixture, and recurring harmonic pedals. Studying the specific examples of the theme's motivic content, then, isolates the individual polyphonic layers to explore their origins and their subsequent development throughout the work. Four primary motivic features of the theme will be analyzed: (1) rising 4ths and major 2nds, (2) chromatic descent, (3) rhythmic propulsion, and (4) significance of the octave.

### ***Rising 4ths and Major 2nds***

As the first melodic figures audible to the listener, a scale of rising 4ths and major 2nds opens the Adagio. It is repeated again in measure 3 on A, a major 2nd below the original pitch level (SEE EXAMPLE 5.4). Later when the opening material returns in measure 9, Brahms has slightly altered the intervallic content to reveal a major 3rd, a minor 2nd, and a perfect 5th. He returns, however, to the design of alternating 4ths and 2nds in measure 10, this time descending in contour. The concept of building a melodic idea, or scale, based on alternating 4ths and 2nds provides a special pitch material which Brahms can manipulate. His chamber works are certainly all tonal, but through the introduction of this scale, he does begin to suggest new ways of dividing the octave and creating principle themes.

**EXAMPLE 5.4:** Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, mm. 1–4, violin 1



It is important to realize that Brahms begins varying this melodic idiom before the first variation. Measure 9 presents an altered intervallic content, measure 10 is a retrograde of the original contour, and

finally, measure 11 treats a portion of the scale in diminution with B, E, and F-sharp (SEE EXAMPLE 5.7; ASCENDING SCALE IN RED, DESCENDING SCALE IN YELLOW). This is indicative of his signature style of developing variation: continual development of the theme's content and character to create something new.<sup>18</sup> This four-note (and sometimes three-note) scale recurs throughout the movement in reinterpreted forms as both accompaniment and melody.

### *Chromatic Descent*

Another motivic shape introduced in the theme is the chromatic descent of typically three notes or more. It appears most clearly in the second violin figure in the first four bars through a three-note descending melodic figure preceded by an eighth-note rest (SEE EXAMPLE 5.5).<sup>19</sup> Another variation of the chromatic descent appears simultaneously in the first viola, rhythmically altered into eighth-note triplets and embellished through an oscillating and recurrent tone (SEE EXAMPLE 5.6).

The second violin statement represents the original form of the motive, and the coinciding viola statement introduces the first variant. Further derivatives of the initial second violin statement appear in the following variations through manipulated rhythms and embellishments, but once again, Brahms develops his motivic material before beginning the first variation, and in this case, through the overlaying of second violin and first viola simultaneously, he invents a new idea before a single statement of the original is heard in its purest form.

**EXAMPLE 5.5:** Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, mm. 1–4, violin 2

*p molto espressivo*

**EXAMPLE 5.6:** Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, mm. 1–4, viola 1

*p molto espressivo*

<sup>18</sup>Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup>This pattern is broken in the fourth grouping in measure 2, when Brahms includes an A-natural for harmonic reasons.

### ***Rhythmic Propulsion***

The second violin and first viola parts from the theme can also be studied in terms of their rhythmic devices. The violin presents the original form of this rhythmic motive as an eighth rest followed by three eighth notes, and again, the viola immediately offers a variation of the motive. Both of these descending chromatic figures are structurally organized by a rest placed at the beginning of each figure. These rests organize the instrument voices, and in addition, they divide the continuous descending line into basic units. It is important to note here that the rest is not used here as a moment of silence, but rather, as a device to organize the parts and propel the motion forwards. The first violin consistently plays during each of these rests, and as a result, this moment of repose in the other voices functions in distinguishing the two secondary voices (second violin and first viola) from the principal melody (first violin). If all of the instruments had begun together on the downbeat, the individual voices and multi-layers would be less pronounced.

The rest therefore maintains a dual role as an element of differentiation in terms of the polyphonic layers of sound as well as an agent of rhythmic propulsion, creating a sense of ongoing motion throughout the theme. It allows motivic figures to begin in the middle of a beat, while the action has already begun, endowing the theme with a perpetual sense of forward motion. This same propelling motion is evident in each of the variations, and the rests also continually appear in order to add clarity to the polyphonic texture.

### ***Significance of the Octave***

As the fourth and least characterizing feature of the theme, the significance of the octave is important mainly due to its secondary function. Octaves are common in Brahms's pedal points, such as the viola's octave F-sharps in measures 5–8 of the theme, but they are also result from the scale of 4ths and 2nds, and furthermore, the octave is the long-range outcome of a chromatic descending line. When these motives are varied through inflections of tone and harmonic changes, the span of the octave is usually preserved (SEE EXAMPLE 5.7, M. 9). Likewise, the scale of perfect 4ths and major 2nds parses the octave symmetrically, a quality that is both maintained and varied in subsequent statements.

EXAMPLE 5.7: Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, theme, mm. 1–12

*p molto espressivo* *rit.*

**Key:**

- P4 & M2 scale (ascending)
- P4 & M2 scale (descending)
- Chromatic descent
- Octaves

motivic rest/rhythm

*p molto espressivo* *rit.*

*p molto espressivo* *rit.*

## V. RECURRING MOTIVES IN THE VARIATIONS

With four primary thematic elements identified, it is possible to follow their subsequent development throughout the rest of the movement. Oftentimes these motives retain their basic structures and are therefore recognizable across variations, capable of easily being traced back to the original theme.<sup>20</sup> In other words, while the motives undergo increasing permutations and embellishments, their original content remains, even to the last variation and the coda. By studying the various placements and reappearances of these four thematic elements, one can begin to perceive how the layers of polyphony from the theme achieve both melodic and harmonic realizations.

### *Rising 4ths and Major 2nds*

The scale of rising 4ths and major 2nds occurs in the first variation, but not as a melodic theme. Instead, it appears in the second viola and first cello as a pizzicato accompaniment (SEE EXAMPLE 5.8). The original scale is presented in rhythmic diminution, but the melodic contour is preserved. The role of this figure now functions in the context of supporting harmony, rather than principle melody. In addition, it has transferred from the high pitches of the violin to the lower register of the ensemble. Finally, the rhythmic motive from the theme, consisting of a rest followed by three eighth-notes, has been applied to the rising gesture of 4ths and 2nds. In this excerpt, Brahms combines two original motives from the theme to create a new pairing of voices. At the same time, the first violin and viola also carry a chromatically descending line in quarter notes. There are multiple levels of the theme functioning in different capacities within the ensemble.

**EXAMPLE 5.8:** Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, variation 1, mm. 15–17, viola 2 and cello 1

The musical score for Example 5.8 consists of two staves, viola 2 (top) and cello 1 (bottom), in 3/4 time. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score begins at measure 15, marked with a '15' and 'pizz.'. The viola part starts with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes G4, A4, and B4. The cello part starts with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes G2, A2, and B2. Both parts continue with similar rhythmic patterns in the following measures. The score concludes with a double bar line and the instruction 'poco cresc.' written below both staves.

<sup>20</sup>This is not always the case in the following theme and variation movement to be studied, the fourth movement of Brahms's String Quartet in B-flat major, op. 67 (See chapter 6). It is quite significant that in Op. 36, the motives from the theme are generally retained until the end. This trait supports the influence of the fantasy-variation described above.

The transition between variation 4 and 5 provides another instance of the scale built upon perfect 4ths and major 2nds (SEE EXAMPLE 5.9). The scale is expanded here and passed consecutively between the first cello and the first violin. Notice that at the point of juncture between measure 62 and 63, the interval that is passed between the cello and violin is a perfect 4th. Two 4ths appear in a row between these measures (C#–F#–B), and Brahms is able to therefore preserve the intervallic content of the scale while also supporting the harmonic movement to the dominant. At the same time, the other voices recall the chromatic descent from the opening.

EXAMPLE 5.9: Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, transition, mm. 61–65

Also bearing an imprint in variation 5, the first three notes from the scale create a palindrome in measure 66 by ascending to F-sharp and immediately descending back to B (B–E–F#–E–B). A similar result occurs in measure 68 (A–D–E–D–A). These are the exact pitches found in the opening measures of the theme (measures 1 and 3, respectively). He retains the basic components of the theme despite significant tempo change and varied contour.

EXAMPLE 5.10: Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, variation 5, mm. 66–69, violin 1



### Chromatic Descent

Chromatic descents are pervasive throughout the entirety of the movement, and the initial three-note descent provides a germinal basis for further development. Just as the scale of 4ths and 2nds was expanded in the first cello line of the transition, the chromatic descent stretches to include four notes, five notes, and sometimes more. In variation 1, the second violin and first viola share the descending chromatic line. The second violin assumes the motivic content from the viola in measure 24 as the latter provides harmonic stability (SEE EXAMPE 5.11). The viola's descent is in rhythmic augmentation in comparison to the theme.

EXAMPLE 5.11: Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, variation 1, mm. 21–24, violin 2 and viola 1

The image shows a musical score for two staves: Violin 2 (top) and Viola 1 (bottom). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The score begins at measure 21. The Violin 2 part features a descending chromatic line starting with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, F#4, E4) in measure 21, followed by a half note (D4) in measure 22, and then a half note (C4) in measure 23. The Viola 1 part provides harmonic support with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include *pp* (pianissimo) and *ppp* (pianississimo).

Other chromatic descents are more hidden within the dense texture of the six voices. At the end of variation 2, familiar rhythms are found, but the distance of the stepwise chromatic line is broadened to encompass several measures (SEE EXAMPLE 5.12). Furthermore, each instrument begins and ends its respective descent at a different moment within the passage. This demonstrates an independence of voices, and consequently, a polyphonic interpretation of the theme.

EXAMPLE 5.12: Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, variation 2, mm. 33–36

The image shows a musical score for six staves, representing the six voices of the sextet. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The score begins at measure 33. The top staff (Violin 1) features a descending chromatic line starting with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, F#4, E4) in measure 33, followed by a half note (D4) in measure 34, and then a half note (C4) in measure 35. The other staves provide harmonic support with various rhythmic patterns. Dynamics include *piu p* (pianissimo) and *pp* (pianissimo). The score ends with a *rit.* (ritardando) marking.

### *Rhythmic Propulsion*

In EXAMPLE 5.12 above, the rhythmic motives are also marked at the beginning. While these rhythmic figures look identical to those at the opening of the theme, Brahms displaces their position within the measure. Only the second cello parallels the opening figure according to its location in the measure, and the others are displaced by two eighth notes. This overlapping structure causes metric ambiguity: one choir of instruments displaces the bar line and thus opposes the fundamental bass line with its original metric placement. Once more, the motive remains intact despite increased variation and embellishing melodic tones.

Another altered state of the propelling rhythmic motive occurs in the violins in variation 4 (SEE EXAMPLE 5.13). Here, the rest has been replaced with a tie and the note values are sixteenth notes. Accordingly, the melodic contour is consistently rising, a loose inversion the chromatic descent from the theme. The two violin parts imitate one another in rhythmic counterpoint. This polyphonic treatment of the two upper voices strengthens their independence from one another while also reinforcing a forward motion in this passage.

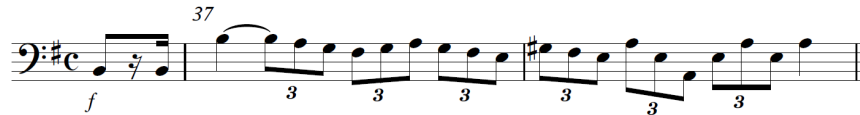
EXAMPLE 5.13: Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, variation 4, mm. 57–60, violins

### *Significance of the Octave*

Octaves commonly function at surface levels within any musical composition, such as to emphasize a particular pitch or to double a note for orchestration issues. In this movement, however, there is one particular use of the octave that seems to represent an outworking of the theme. In variation 3, the fugato portion of the movement, the principle subject begins with a leap of an octave (SEE EXAMPLE 5.14). After the initial leap, the ensuing triplets rise and fall to decorate the octave, ultimately shifting from

a harmony on B to A, in the case of the cello line in EXAMPLE 5.14. As the fugato becomes more and more complex, each line of embellishing triplets is slightly varied for harmonic implications, and the listener ultimately recognizes the octave leap as the distinctive head motive of this variation. The third variation then is based on the motivic leap of an octave and its manipulation. Variation 4 parallels this notion with a less strict treatment of melodic inversion through a descending octave leap.

**EXAMPLE 5.14:** Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, variation 3, mm. 37–8, cello 2



As each of these motives from the theme have been studied in isolation, it is necessary to recall that even when attempting to separate the texture and illuminate specific instances of the motivic workings throughout the variations, the texture was often too complex to focus only on one motive at a time. Several of the excerpts demonstrated a composite organization of thematic motives combining into various textures, diminutions, and augmentations. For example, the pizzicato ostinato in variation 1 was a combination of the scale in 4ths and 2nds and the propelling rhythmic motive (SEE EXAMPLE 5.8), and in variation 2, chromatic descents were disguised through metric displacement and once again, the familiar rhythmic motive from the theme (SEE EXAMPLE 5.12).

When these motives are then arranged through a loose contrapuntal framework, Brahms's approach to theme and variation becomes exceedingly complex, suggesting a polyphonic framework.

Littlewood describes this technique, specifically with regard to variation 1:

Each [motive or figure in variation 1] can be related to the theme. Each line, however is not a development of an individual strand of the theme, for each freely draws on elements from all parts: the independence and equality of the instruments are continually being reaffirmed.<sup>21</sup>

Littlewood's observation could be applied to the entire movement, in that Brahms's treatment of motivic material allows each instrument to assume an individual voice. Moreover, his dual use of both historical

<sup>21</sup>Littlewood, p. 152.

and fantasy variation techniques encourages a unique interaction of surface-level motives within the whole of the texture. A dynamic interplay of these ideas is evident in the coda, the final synthesis of his rich motivic content.

## VI. THE CODA: A GRAND FINALE OF MOTIVIC INTERPLAY

In a theme and variation which carries properties of both strict variation technique and a freer, fantasy-style, it is highly revealing to consider the function of the coda within the broad formal scope of the movement. The coda here demonstrates a culmination of the compositional ideas set forth from the beginning. It also supports the general techniques of variation the composer chose to implement, and finally, it provides the conclusion to the story Brahms sought to convey through a series of variation units. All of the initial motives are played out on a large scope in the coda.

Throughout the variations in the Op. 36 Adagio, a basic harmonic scheme is established (SEE TABLE 5.1), especially when studying the recurrent placement of the F-sharp pedal. In the earlier Op. 18 theme and variation, a final variation appeared within the context of the coda, bearing a similar harmonic structure to the theme, which was derived from the *folia* progression. Here in the Op. 36 Adagio, however, the previous pattern of harmonic progression is less pronounced, and instead, the multiple layers of motivic interplay direct the final measures of the movement. Fragments of the scale of 4ths and 2nds appear in all voices, both ascending and descending (SEE EXAMPLE 5.15). Many of these scales emerge in diminutions (see violas, m. 78; cello 1, mm. 79–80); others explore the gesture of the rising and falling 4th transposed by the interval of a 2nd (see cello 1, m. 78; violin 1 and viola 1, m. 82). Indeed, the last four measures pass a strand of the scale across the voices in a seamless interchange (see the motion between cello 1, violin 2, and violin 1 in mm. 85–6).

In addition, pedal points based on the octave also reappear briefly in measures 79 (A and D), 81 (A and B), and 82 (F-sharp). The octave thus functions in a practical harmonic role just as it did in the preceding variations, and interestingly, the F-sharp pedal occurs in the second violin and second viola in measure 82, the fifth measure of the coda, in the same placement as in the variations. Pale hints of the

EXAMPLE 5.15: Brahms Sextet, op. 36/iii, coda, mm. 78–87

78

pizz. *p molto espress.* arco *cresc.*

81

*f* *dim.*

84

*p* *pp* *pp* *pp*

*p* *dolce* *dim.* *pp* *pp*

*p* *dolce* *dim.* *pp* *pp*

*p* *dolce* *dim.* *pp* *pp*

*p* *dolce* *dim.* *pp* *pp*

Key:

- P4 & M2 scale (ascending)
- P4 & M2 scale (descending)
- Chromatic descent
- Octaves

motivic rest/rhythm

harmonic content of the theme thus still exert influence in the tonal structure of the coda. Chromatic descents are prevalent in measures 82–84 in the first cello and viola, layered between the other motivic figures. And lastly, the familiar rhythmic motive appears consecutively in measures 85–87, propelling the voices to the final close of the movement. Each of the original idioms from the theme is preserved and varied through a multi-voice dialogue.

In this way, a final variation does exist in the coda: though not grounded by a recurring harmonic progression, this variation is based on the polyphonic technique that characterizes the entire movement. His variation technique is portrayed through discourse between individual staves and the resulting composite texture. This method, as evidenced in the coda, provides a compelling insight into the composer's attitude towards variation form.

## VII. CONVERGING STYLES: TWO TYPES OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY VARIATION FORM

Brahms's Sextet in G major, op. 36, charts a new direction in telling the story of his approach to theme in variation. While basic formal structures were followed through standard 12-bar lengths, changes of tempo affect the ultimate length and balance of the variations. The variations reflect a similar harmonic direction from the theme, yet Brahms chose a theme with motivic implications that suggest a polyphonic nature of variation. In turn, his processes of variation are duly influenced by the content and properties of the original theme. Regarding the composer's attitude to the nineteenth-century fantasy variation, Sisman observes the following:

What the variations Brahms labeled "fantasy-variation"...have in common are extensive alterations in the structure, metre and tempo of the theme while retaining its melody or motifs. Brahms's own variations, like Beethoven's, may depart from many details of the theme but normally retain its formal outline.<sup>22</sup>

The principal motives of Brahms's theme are certainly kept, but the question at hand is whether Brahms preserved the general structure of the theme despite the tempo changes and the hints of fantasy variation. Just as Sisman contends for a convergence of both strict and fantasy variation, I concur with her research

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<sup>22</sup>Sisman, "Variations," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*.

and consequently suggest that Brahms reaches a balance of these two approaches through his reconciliation of polyphony and variation technique. The thematic aspects of the theme also inevitably maintained, but in this movement, the formal structure also remains through the fifth variation, and even into the coda, through the faint reminder of an F-sharp pedal. Brahms thus achieves integrity in the formal design while still altering the tempo and retaining the thematic material, techniques typical of the fantasy variation.

The success of merging together the older (historical) and newer (fantasy) variation tradition is due in large part to his polyphonic approach. The free exchange of independent voices allows both motivic and structural features from the theme to coexist while the composer simultaneously embarks in an innovative variation technique. In the Op. 36 Adagio, Brahms approaches variation form with a concept of multiple layers of theme which can be manipulated and altered to collectively influence new strands of polyphony. The end result creates a set of variations exhibiting both structural and thematic unity.

## **Chapter 6: Variation and Unity: The Finale of Brahms's String Quartet, Op. 67**

As a composer well-versed in the technique of variation and development, Johannes Brahms held and expressed distinct views in his letters regarding the formal structure of theme and variation. Through these letters, it is keenly evident that Brahms was well aware of the historical tradition of the genre and that he was a student of the variation works of composers such as J.S. Bach, Handel, Schumann, and especially Beethoven, whom he exceedingly admired for his treatment of a theme followed by successive variations.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the finale movement in Brahms's String Quartet in B-flat Major, op. 67, provides grounds for an illuminating analysis in his approach to the genre. Here, he combines theme and variation with a cyclical technique of recalling thematic material from the first movement in the work. These themes and others comprise the material that he alters, retains, and develops throughout the movement, ultimately achieving an organic unity that solidifies the entire work.

Three aspects of his theme and variation style contribute to its unique treatment in the Op. 67 finale movement: (1) form and harmony, (2) teleological development of the theme, and (3) organic unity. These characteristics uncover Brahms's perspectives and practices in the formal design of theme and variation as well as his unification of the variations within the movement. On a broader level, this movement provides cohesion for the entire work through the inclusion of a musical quote from the first movement. Furthermore, when compared to other theme and variation movements for strings within the composer's oeuvre, the Op. 67 finale portrays a convincing development of the composer's style and maturity within his concept of theme and variation.

### I. FORM AND HARMONY

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "ornamental variation" was a prominent theme and variation type, bridging the gap between the "Baroque song variation" and the "nineteenth-century

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<sup>1</sup>Johannes Brahms, *Life and Letters*, edited by Styra Avins, translated by Josef Eisinger and Styra Avins. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 384.



character variation.”<sup>2</sup> In ornamental variation, the notes from the original theme are generally persevered, but with significant embellishment and alteration. This type of variation is accompanied by a relatively homophonic texture with limited contrasting events, and examples can be observed in the works of Haydn and Mozart, and, most notably here, Brahms.<sup>3</sup> Nelson also observes that the rhythmic technique of Baroque diminutions (smaller and smaller rhythms as the variations progress) is still indigenous to the class of ornamental variations, and he suggests two particular techniques of contrast that are readily found in these variation types: (1) harmonic contrast by supplying a variation in the opposite mode near the middle of the piece, and (2) subsequent rhythmic contrast of increased activity by following the variation in the opposite mode with a variation that projects a change in tempo, and often a change of meter.<sup>4</sup>

This prototype provides the background for approaching the finale of Brahms’s String Quartet, op. 67, and identifying which practices Brahms emulated in the long tradition of variation writing, and which moments are experimental in nature, representing his innovative contributions to the musical style at the turn of the century. The standard characteristics of ornamental variation are all featured in the finale movement in varying degrees. Simultaneously, the composer’s divergence from this model reveals his individual style and nineteenth-century voice. An examination of the movement begins by exploring the formal and harmonic aspects of the movement as well as the inherent features of the theme itself.

### ***Formal Structure***

The finale movement in the Op. 67 string quartet consists of a theme with eight variations and a lengthy coda (SEE TABLE 6.1 AND FIGURE 6.1). It could also be argued that a final ninth variation is conflated into the coda. The theme and each variation contain structural repeat signs and double bars that mark the first and second parts of each variation. Lasting 12 measures with a repeat positioned after the first four measures, the theme extends to the length of 16 measures in all. In variations one through six, the first part, which lasts four measures in the theme, includes an internal repeat, frequently with further embellishment, bringing the total length to eight measures. The second part in each of these variations is

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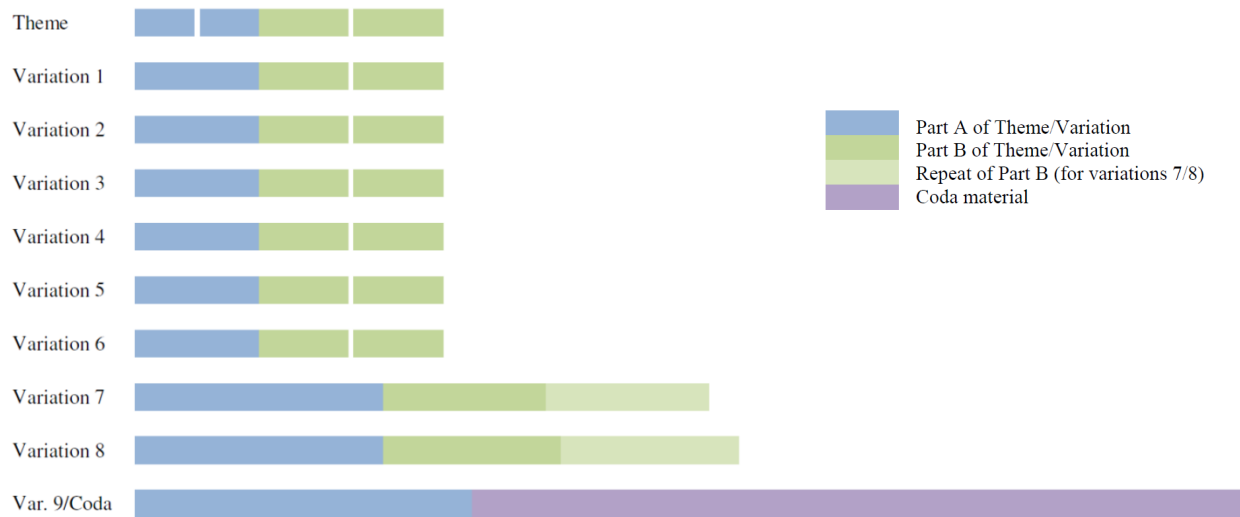
<sup>2</sup>Nelson, *The Technique of Variation: A Study of the Instrumental Variation from Antonio de Cabezón to Max Reger*, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 81.

six measures long with a structural repeat, which extends the second part to twelve measures, and brings the total length of each variation to 20 measures rather than the 16 measures found in the original theme.

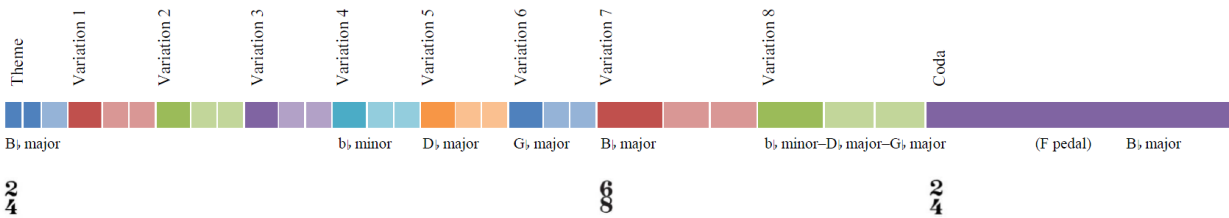
**TABLE 6.1:** Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/iv, Length of variations: A comparison



After establishing a conventional length of 20 measures in each variation, Brahms alters the expected length in variations seven and eight to 38 and 40 measures, respectively. In these last variations, the internal repeat still occurs in the first part, and the formal repeat in the second part. Here, the first part lasts 16 measures (the equivalent of the entire theme), and the second part lasts 11 and 12 measures, respectively. In addition, by doubling the second parts through the repeat, each of the B sections (second part) last 22 and 24 measures, respectively. The increased lengths of variations 7 and 8 also reflect a change in meter. Brahms changes meter from 2/4 to 6/8, exhibiting the exact type of rhythmic contrast ornamental variations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries frequently exhibited.

In the ornament variation, a harmonic contrast in the opposite mode typically precedes the rhythmic contrast, as found in variations 7 and 8. The variation in the opposite mode, the first type of contrast that Nelson proposed, can be seen in variation 4, when the tonality shifts from B-flat major to B-flat minor. As typical to an ornamental variation, Brahms includes this minor variation and also explores two other harmonies (D-flat major and G-flat major) before he engages in the second type of contrast, the rhythmic contrast in variations 7 and 8.

**FIGURE 6.1:** Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/iv, Broad formal scheme



Finally, the coda returns to 2/4 and lasts for 75 measures, a few measures shy of the combined length of variations 7 and 8. Due to its length and structural role to the movement, and more broadly to the entire quartet, the coda provides the final cohesion and stability that binds the work together. Within the coda, a final variation (variation 9) begins and gradually evolves into a dominant prolongation of coda material. Throughout each of the variations, regardless of their varying length, the basic content of the original theme acts as an axis of stability. A closer study, then, of the content of the initial theme provides a deeper understanding of its alteration, augmentation, and segmentation in the variations that follow.

### *The Nature and Characteristics of the Theme*

Taking a detailed account of the actual content and properties of the theme provides a firm grounding in the material to be varied. As an expert on theme and variation, Elaine Sisman describes Brahms's general variation technique as one of "allowing the character and source of the theme to determine the nature of the variations."<sup>5</sup> This suggests that Brahms approached each variation movement with sensitivity to the theme's nature and future potential. Already divided into a two-part structure, the first part (Part A) is comprised of measures 1 through 4, and the second part (Part B), measures 5 through 10.

In parsing out the first four measures, a B-flat major arpeggio dominates the harmony in the head motive of the first two measures (SEE EXAMPLES 6.1 AND TABLE 6.2). The first violin and cello oppose each other melodically through the inversion of F and B-flat (sol and do) while the viola dutifully marks

<sup>5</sup>Sisman, "Brahms and the Variation Canon," p. 133.

the arpeggio in triplets. Plagal motion occurs between measures 2 and 3 of the theme, and the first part ends in measure 4 on octave Ds on the mediant.

EXAMPLE 6.1: Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/iv, theme, mm. 1–10

At the beginning of part 2, the octave Ds change into D major, the major mediant of B-flat major, marking the establishment of a chromatic mediant relationship. The second part emphasizes half-step and whole-step gestures with appoggiatura figures. It could be divided into three two-measure segments: mm. 5–6, mm. 7–8, and mm. 9–10. In measures 5 and 6, the incomplete neighbor/appoggiatura motives are explored and developed as well as the fully diminished seventh harmony. B-flat sonorities appear, followed by a hint of the chromaticism in the violin 2 and viola parts. The texture changes in measures 7 and 8 to a homophonic texture as the first violin then plays fragments and derivatives of the theme while the others comment through brief, abrupt interjections.

**TABLE 6.2:** Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/iv, Harmonic outline

	<b>Part 1 (A)</b>		<b>Part 2 (B)</b>	
Theme mm. 1-10 2/4	m.1 B $\flat$ major:	m.4 D major: V-I	m.5 D major:	m. 9 m.10 B $\flat$ major: V7-I (IV-I)
Variation 1 mm. 11-24 2/4	m.11 B $\flat$ major:	m.18 D major: V7-I	m.19 D major:	m. 23 m.24 B $\flat$ major: V7-I (IV-I)
Variation 2 mm. 25-38 2/4	m.25 B $\flat$ major:	m.32 D major: (V)-I	m.33 D major:	m. 37 m.38 B $\flat$ major: V4/2-I V-I
Variation 3 mm. 39-52 2/4	m.39 B $\flat$ major:	m.46 D major: ii-V4/3-I	m.47 D major:	m. 51 m.52 B $\flat$ major: V7-I (IV-I)
Variation 4 mm. 53-66 2/4	m.53 b $\flat$ minor:	m.60 D $\flat$ major: ii-V-I	m.61 (D $\flat$ major)	m. 65 m.66 b $\flat$ minor: vii $\circ$ 4/3-i (iv-i)
Variation 5 mm. 67-80 2/4	m.67 D $\flat$ major	m.74 f minor	m.75 f minor	m.80 G $\flat$ major: V $\rightarrow$
Variation 6 mm. 81-94 2/4	m.81 G $\flat$ major (I)	m.88 B $\flat$ major	m.89 B $\flat$ major (sequential)	m. 93 m.94 G $\flat$ major: V7-I (IV6-I)
Variation 7 mm. 95-121 6/8	m.95 B $\flat$ major:	m.110 D major: V7-I	m.111 b $\flat$ minor (sequential) A7 $\rightarrow$ D	m. 120 m.121 B $\flat$ major: V7-I (IV-I)
Variation 8 mm. 122-149 6/8	m.122 b $\flat$ minor:	m.137 D $\flat$ major: IV-V-I	m.138 (1 <sup>st</sup> ending) (2 <sup>nd</sup> ending)	m.149 b $\flat$ minor: (V)-I G $\flat$ major: vii $\circ$ -I
Var. 9/Coda mm. 150-224 2/4	(Variation 9)		Coda	
	m.150 G $\flat$ major:	m. 171 (modulatory—leading to F ped.)	m. 172 Dominant (F) pedal	m.224 B $\flat$ major: V-I

Finally, in measures 9 and 10, the opening head motive returns with minor adjustments to the melodic and harmonic content. Just as the head motive returns, however, an elision of harmonic progression and melodic phrasing is apparent through an imperfect authentic cadence between measures 8 and 9. The harmonic movement cadences on B-flat, and melodic repetition of the head motive enters at this harmonic return. Within this brief restatement, Brahms inserts plagal motion (mm. 9–10) to close off the theme, which could be considered a support that simply points back to the preceding authentic cadence.

The role of the bass is also an important harmonic and formal concept in this movement. Elaine Sisman notes that as early as 1856, Brahms had begun “developing a new critical perspective privileging the idea of the bass” in his variations.<sup>6</sup> In 1869, six years before Brahms would compose the Op. 67 string quartet, he wrote to his friend Adolf Schubring<sup>7</sup> about theme and variations, revealing his thoughts about the role of the bass:

...[In] a theme for variations, almost the only thing that *actually* has meaning for me is the bass. But that is sacred to me, it is the firm footing upon which I then build my tales. What I do with the melody is merely playing around, or ingenious—playing around.<sup>8</sup>

In the same letter, Brahms explains what he means by a special significance given to the bass:

When I vary the melody, I can hardly do more than be clever or charming, or lend depth to a beautiful thought, albeit with genuine feeling. On top of a given bass, I truly invent the new, I invent new melodies for it, I create.<sup>9</sup>

Brahms argues, then, that melodic variation is meaningless without its variance and interpretation against the bass. On the other hand, when a melody is varied in the context of a bass foundation, the deflected pitches or rhythmic diminutions carry increased value within the greater work and against the original theme. The bass movement therefore provides an integral element in understanding the variance in each variation on the theme, just as the bass held a significant role in the passacaglia of Brahms’s Sextet in B-flat major (SEE CHAPTER 4).

Studying the movement of the bass in the cello part of the theme reveals a strong emphasis on do, fa, and sol. These bass notes often support the harmonies I, IV, and V (SEE EXAMPLE 6.2). Movement of dominant to tonic appears at the beginning (mm. 1–2) and when the head motive returns (mm. 8–9). The V to I movement in the bass underscores the classical polarity of tonic-dominant relationships established immediately from the beginning. With this relationship established, Brahms then introduces a different pairing with the tonic. This polarity of tonic and dominant is a relationship that was known by composers in the Classical period, but composers in the early nineteenth century had already begun to weaken the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Adolf Schubring was a writer for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* who published a series of insightful and favorable articles on Brahms’s music in 1862. The two later became friends. See Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography*, p. 233.

<sup>8</sup>Johannes Brahms, *Life and Letters*, edited by Styra Avins, p. 383.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 384.

strong dichotomy. Regarding Beethoven’s early compositional period, Charles Rosen claims that the young composer “attempted to find substitutes for the dominant in the classical tonic-dominant polar relation.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Brahms, who was consciously aware of the Beethovenian shadow he followed, also weakens the tonic-dominant polarity through the substitution of dominant with the subdominant. Plagal motion that is found frequently in structural moments within the theme (mm. 2–3; 9–10) thus has the potential to weaken the sharp contrast between tonic and dominant. This juxtaposition of plagal and authentic cadential movement is particularly led by the bass. It is a significant characteristic of the theme, and it deserves further study throughout the variations, especially due to Brahms’s own comments about the role of the bass in theme and variation in his aforementioned letter to Adolf Schubring.

**EXAMPLE 6.2:** Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/iv, bass movement in theme, mm. 1-10, cello

Part 1 Part 2

m. 1    m. 2    m. 3    m. 4    m. 5    m. 6    m. 7    m. 8    m. 9    m. 10

I    V7-I    IV-I    ii-vi-V/III-III
V7-I    IV-I  
T    D-T    S-T    M
D-T    S-T

In addition to cadential movement in the bass, the theme contains a rich rhythmic variety and potential for development. On a broad scheme, the contour of the theme itself is prone to metric ambiguity. Deborah Stein classifies “tonal ambiguity” as encompassing any of the following variables: (1) harmony, (2) rhythm, (3) meter, (4) phrase structure, and (5) form.<sup>11</sup> She later expounds on the concept by explaining that “[musical] ambiguity often occurs at the outset of a work, where an initial ambiguity poses a compositional issue or problem that is worked out over the rest of the piece.”<sup>12</sup> Many scholars in musical ambiguity such as Deborah Stein or David Epstein<sup>13</sup> cite works by Brahms when defining the properties of tonal ambiguity, and it should therefore not be unexpected to find this singular

<sup>10</sup>Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 382.

<sup>11</sup>Deborah Stein, “Introduction to Musical Ambiguity,” from *Engaging Music: Essays in Music Analysis*, ed. Deborah Stein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 79.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup>See Deborah Stein, p. 81, and Epstein, *Beyond Orpheus*, pp. 162–76.

characteristic in the present work to be studied. For example, in measures 1, 2, 8, and 9, the fourth beat is marked with an accent. When the violin 1 states this motive in varied form during rests in the other instruments in measures 7 and 8, this rhythmic upbeat could be perceived easily as a downbeat, an instance of rhythmic ambiguity. Its position in the measure is only understood retrospectively, when the theme is repeated, or when variation 1 ensues, and the downbeat is more strongly articulated.

In summary, the theme presents several motivic and harmonic devices that serve as the foundation for further developments in texture, harmony, and melody. One could even argue that Brahms begins varying the theme before the first variation, within the theme itself, considering the variant theme that appears in measures 7 and 8. Overall, some significant characteristics of the theme include the following: (1) juxtaposed relationships of “sol” and “do” in melodic and harmonic textures, (2) incomplete neighbor/appoggiatura relationships between whole steps and half steps, (3) metric ambiguity by emphasizing strong gestural motives on weaker beats, (4) significance of the major mediant and chromatic mediant relationships, and (5) the combination of plagal and authentic cadences to demonstrate closure and release. In the following variations, aspects of the theme’s character combine within the context of a strong bass support to create new statements and musical meaning within each variation.

Brahms wrote convincingly in his letters regarding the idea of *creating*, or *inventing*, new melodic ideas only through the strength of a bass framework and support. Likewise in his music, the bass assumes a foundational role as other characteristics of the theme are retained at times and varied at other points in order to create something new. Consequently, with the thought of inventing a new melodic idea from a former statement, one can begin to explore the linear, or teleological, development of the theme. This concept of continuous, logical development throughout the work, as later coined by Arnold Schoenberg as *developing variation*,<sup>14</sup> is a prevalent feature that describes Brahms’s development of a theme. Here, it allows the work to function at a much deeper level than simply as a series of discreet variations. Building upon Robert Nelson’s definition of the *ornamental variation*, this teleological development of the theme is a small foreshadowing of the *nineteenth-century character variation*, in

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<sup>14</sup>See Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, and Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*.



which the composer “alter[s] the expression, or ‘character,’ of the theme profoundly.”<sup>15</sup> Brahms’s treatment of theme and variation thus embodies a multi-faceted approach, involving variation of the bass, the pervasive technique of developing variation, and the relationship of each variation to one another, as well as to the entire movement and work. This process can be studied especially through the logical discourse of the theme as traced throughout the movement.

## II. TELEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEME

Carl Dahlhaus describes Brahms’s embellishment of a theme as a formal procedure which unifies the entire work. By elevating the idea of variation to a formal principle, Dahlhaus suggests that the very essence of Brahms’s compositional process is found through his development of initial motivic material, whether studied in the theme or variation genre or any other form, such as through-composed, ternary, or sonata form. With this significant variation principle, Dahlhaus indicates that Brahms’s “[musical] form takes the shape of a discourse in sound in which motives develop out of earlier motives like ideas, each of which is a consequence of its predecessors.”<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, if each new variation is developed from the previous idea, and if the bass provides the opportunity to make *something new*, Brahms is proposing an innovative idea in the formal procedure of theme and variation, one that does not consider each variation as a discreet entity, but rather builds on each variation, bringing the work to a complete whole. As explained by Frisch, Schoenberg understood Brahms’s developing variation as “[building] a theme by means of a very free, but recognizable, reinterpretation of the intervals and rhythms of a brief motive.”<sup>17</sup> While the process of developing variation can be found in Brahms’s complete oeuvre, it is particularly revealing to study its role in the works and movements conceived formally as theme and variations.

Once again, a look at the composer’s thoughts on the issue is particularly revealing. Brahms wrote about this idea of creating and inventing within the context of the broad variation form to the violinist Joseph Joachim in 1856, 13 years prior to Schubring’s letter:

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<sup>15</sup>Nelson, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup>Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, p. 50.

<sup>17</sup>Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*, p. 5.

Sometimes I reflect on variation form and think that variations should be treated with greater strictness and purity. The old composers strictly maintained the bass line of the theme, their true theme, throughout. In Beethoven the melody, harmony, and rhythm is varied so beautifully. But sometimes I find that later composers (like the two of us!) do more rooting about (I don't know how to express it) in the theme. We timidly stick to the melody, but we don't treat it freely and really create *nothing new from it*, but merely encumber it. But the melody, as a result, is quite unrecognizable.<sup>18</sup>

Brahms clearly aimed to unite his variations and create something new out of the original, pointing towards a logical type of musical discourse. The role of the bass is the critical component allowing Brahms the freedom to invent and to create.

### *Architectonic versus Logical Discourse*

In seeking to rebuild and understand the nineteenth-century arguments that purported Brahms to be a conservative composer, Dahlhaus references the writings of musicologist Jacques Handschin,<sup>19</sup> who presented the opposing analytical paradigms of “architectonic” and “logical” formal designs. Whereas architectonic form consists of (1) “balance between phrases, periods, and sets of periods,” and (2) “a clearly focused, unambiguous scheme of chord progressions and tonalities,” logical form is a more organic and continuous approach to music, portraying unity through constant development. Between the two, the latter is more aligned with Brahms's musical process.<sup>20</sup> Dahlhaus gives the following definition of logical form:

Logical form, on the other hand, resides in motivic connections, which hold a movement together from within, or alternatively, in a thematic process, which gradually causes an at first inconspicuous turn of melody to become richer and richer in meaning as ever more conclusions are drawn from it.<sup>21</sup>

Following the idea of developing successive variations towards the idea of a conclusion, the Op. 67 analysis by Julian Littlewood organizes Brahms's variations into groups of three according to their

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<sup>18</sup>Johannes Brahms, *Life and Letters*, edited by Styra Avins, p. 138.

<sup>19</sup>Jacques Handschin (1886–1955) was a Swiss musicologist who contributed greatly to medieval musical analysis and wrote the history textbook, *Musikgeschichte im Überblick* (1948), the text in which the terms “architectonic” and “logical” forms originate. See Hans Oesch and Janna Kniazeva. “Handschin, Jacques.” In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/12319> (accessed April 15, 2012).

<sup>20</sup>Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, translated by J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 255. Dahlhaus explains that a compositional shift from architectonic forms to logical forms occurred steadily, beginning in the late eighteenth century and culminating in the early twentieth century.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

character and tonal progression.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, as noted by Elaine Sisman, Brahms expressed particular fondness for Beethoven's variations since they typically functioned interdependently, connecting each variation to the preceding and following ones.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Brahms was working to portray a sense of unity or progression between and throughout his variations. These formal principles lay the foundation for analysis in the variations within the Op. 67 string quartet.

### *Variations 1, 2, and 3*

In the first three variations, Brahms establishes a tonal foundation in B-flat major with a harmonic pattern that moves to the major mediant (D major) by the end of the first part, begins the second part in the major mediant, and moves back to B-flat major by the end of each variation. As the harmonic plan is stable throughout these variations, the bass movement also supports the harmonies with the respective tonic (B-flat), dominant (F), and subdominant harmonies (E-flat) (SEE EXAMPLE 6.2). While varied in rhythm and register, the content of the bass in the first three variations remains unaltered from the original theme.

In terms of melodic variation, a change in color is immediately perceptible at the beginning of the first variation (SEE EXAMPLE 6.3). The melody has been transported to the inner voice, the viola, and this new color gives instant variance to the previous texture. The principle notes of the melody and the theme can easily be traced through the viola in both variations 1 and 2. Added chromaticism is especially apparent in variation 2, and the first violin also joins the viola with the melody in measure 28. In variation 3, the first violin assumes the principle melodic role while the viola continues to underscore some of the central idioms of the melody. In terms of rhythm, Brahms moves from perpetual sixteenth notes (variation 1), to a rhythmic reduction (variation 2), and finally to continuous triplet sixteenth notes (variation 3). Some of the more chromatic sections that diverge from the theme are found in the Part B in each variation.

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<sup>22</sup>Littlewood, *The Variations of Johannes Brahms*, p. 237.

<sup>23</sup>Sisman, "Brahms and the Variation Canon," pp. 134–5.

EXAMPLE 6.3: Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/iv, teleological development in variations 1, 2, and 3<sup>24</sup>

Theme (mm. 1–4): violin 1 and cello

Variation 1 (mm. 11–18): viola and cello

11

Variation 2 (mm. 25–32): viola and cello

25

Variation 3 (mm. 39–46): violin 1, viola, and cello

39

<sup>24</sup>In these examples, the red notes are the primary notes of the original melody that are preserved. Likewise, the blue notes are the recurring tones from the original bass line.

Strong characteristics presented universally across this first grouping of variations are (1) harmonic shifts between the tonic (B-flat major) and the major mediant (D major), (2) the recurrent bass originated from the theme, and (3) the melodic exploration of color and rhythmic texture.

*Variations 4, 5, and 6*

In the middle variations, Brahms reveals a harmonic direction with each successive variation: B-flat minor (variation 4), D-flat major (variation 5), and G-flat major (variation 6) (SEE TABLE 6.2 AND EXAMPLE 6.4). Accordingly, these variations are also much more adventuresome in terms of the bass and the melodic variations. The tonic, dominant, and subdominant relationships in the bass are all quite present at the end of the first part of variation 4, but in variation 5, Brahms frees the bass from this pattern and establishes a unique motivic variation. Also in variation 5, it becomes more and more evident that the direction of the upper strings is becoming more teleological, building from the variants that preceded them. In the same way, the simultaneous bass variation on a D-flat major arpeggio stems from the motivic material Brahms began in variation 4. These triplet arpeggio patterns in the bass are simply modified to support the new variation and the new D-flat major harmony. Not only is the melody developing through logical discourse, but the bass has also begun its own series of variations that grow through the principle of developing variation.

**EXAMPLE 6.4:** Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/iv, teleological development in variations 4, 5, and 6<sup>25</sup>

**Variation 4 (mm. 53–60): violin 1 and cello (B-flat minor)**

<sup>25</sup>In these examples, the red notes are the primary notes of the original melody that are preserved. Likewise, the blue notes are the recurring tones from the original bass line.

**Variation 5 (mm. 67–70): violin 1, violin 2, viola, and cello (D-flat major)**

**Variation 6 (mm. 81–88): viola and cello (G-flat major)**

Finally, in variation 6, Brahms moves the melodic variation to the cello voice, and the bass now assumes the principle melodic role through a clear, pizzicato development of the theme. In this case, brief moments of a hocket technique can be observed between the viola and the cello, as the viola and the other upper strings sustain significant pitches during the rests in the bass variation. Considering that the melodic voice from the original theme has shifted to the bass, Brahms not only varies the color and texture through this move, but he also illuminates the role of the bass: although its main role is to support and reveal the variance in thematic material, it is now the center of melodic activity, at least for a brief moment. While pitch content through transposition and varied contour are still present and recognizable, Brahms has begun to create, or invent something new in these variations. No longer does each variation stem from solely the original theme, but instead, they build from one another, drawing recent material from each successive variation.

***Variations 7 and 8***

Variations 7 and 8 are a classic example of what Robert Nelson describes as the “adagio-allegro pair” that often occurs near the close of an ornamental variation (SEE EXAMPLE 6.5).<sup>26</sup> He describes the

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<sup>26</sup>Nelson, p. 81.

allegro variation as typically invoking a change of meter, and the adagio variation as “conspicuous,” due to its “juxtaposition to the concluding allegro.”<sup>27</sup> Brahms’s allegro variation begins in measure 94 with a drastic change in tempo and a meter change from 2/4 to 6/8. Interestingly, the tonic-dominant and tonic-subdominant bass movement is retained here, though highly ornamented. The theme is present, with generous upbeats in the first violin and a familiar melodic gesture in the second violin and viola. In this variation, the listener is immediately drawn to the return of the opening material from the first movement of the work. Harmonically cast in B-flat major, this variation portrays Brahms’s sense of organic unity by superimposing first movement themes on top of the finale themes.

Almost as soon as the lively variation 7 has begun, it concludes and the adagio variation, number 8, enters with a much different character. This variation explores the same harmonic content earlier developed in variations 4, 5, and 6.<sup>28</sup> Beginning in B-flat minor, the variation cadences in D-flat major in measure 137, and G-flat major in the second ending in measure 149. Brahms explores this broad harmonic progression much more quickly as he nears the end of the piece. The bass voice assumes many liberties throughout this variation, but Brahms still maintains its strong harmonic and gestural role. Due to the harmonic allusion to the previous variations, variation 8 has more significant ties to the music that immediately preceded it than to the theme itself, another example of the continually developing and logical discourse that Brahms pioneers throughout this movement.

**EXAMPLE 6.5:** Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/iv, teleological development in variations 7 and 8<sup>29</sup>

**Variation 7 (mm. 95–110): Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Cello**

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Littlewood, p. 236.

<sup>29</sup>In these examples, the red notes are the primary notes of the original melody that are preserved. Likewise, the blue notes are the recurring tones from the original bass line.

**Variation 8 (mm. 122–129): Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Cello**

**Variation 9/Coda**

Brahms's use of sectional repeats and formal divisions ends in measure 149, at the end of variation 8. The technique of continuously developing the theme, however, is still in full strength. One could argue that variation 9 begins in measure 150, but the exact closure point and transition to the coda is perhaps more ambiguous. Variation 9 begins in G-flat major, and by measure 172, a dominant pedal (in B-flat major) is established, and the Coda ensues until the end. In this way, the Coda makes a full circle harmonically and eventually reaches B-flat major, but Brahms continues the teleological development of the newly transformed theme until the very end. Appoggiatura and incomplete neighbor motion occurs in measures 198 to 205, possibly relating back to the second section of the theme through melodic inversion. Fragments of the theme are found in canon and in stretto in measures 205 to 212 (SEE EXAMPLE 6.6). As another instance of the blending of first and last movement motivic material, in measures 214–24, both the bass foundation and the soprano variant of theme return to close the movement, along with the first movement “horn call” in the second violin and viola (SEE EXAMPLE 6.7). The composer therefore achieves a continuous, logical discourse of the variation while also uniting the entire work through a



reconciliation of first and last movement themes. Organic unity is achieved not by merely repeating themes or material, but rather, by a persistent teleological development of the material, melodically, texturally, and through the support of the bass.

**EXAMPLE 6.6:** Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/iv, stretto fragments in coda, mm. 206–212

**EXAMPLE 6.7:** Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/iv, first and last movement motives in coda, mm. 214–220

### III. ORGANIC UNITY

Perceiving this unity, Frisch has discussed the cyclic nature of the Op. 67 string quartet, recognizing the strong relationship between the first and last movement. He portends that the very nature of the finale theme from measures 1 through 4 is indeed a derivative of the first movement “horn call” theme appearing at the beginning of the entire work (SEE EXAMPLE 6.8).<sup>30</sup> He also shows how variation 8 recalls a transitional theme from the exposition in the first movement.<sup>31</sup> Organic unity throughout the Brahms string quartet, op. 67 can be studied on two levels: (1) broad formal principles and motivic recall

<sup>30</sup>See Walter Frisch, “The Snake Bites Its Tail: Cyclic Processes in Brahms’s Third String Quartet, op. 67,” *The Journal of Musicology*, 22/1 (2005), p. 168.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

that unite the entire work, and (2) the enduring, logical development of the original theme in the finale that provides continuity and cohesion between each successive variation.

EXAMPLE 6.8: Brahms String Quartet No. 3, op. 67/i, mm. 1–4

From a historical viewpoint in Brahms's compositional practice, this theme and variation contains characteristics of both the ornamental variation and the nineteenth-century character variation. Brahms manipulates the melody through embellishment and variance, a characteristic of the ornamental variation, yet his approach to logical discourse through the steady transformation of the theme as consecutive variations build from one another is an innovative technique of the nineteenth-century character variation. Additionally, while formal principles of the ornamental variation can be studied in relationships such as the adagio-allegro paradigm, a more organic approach to formal divisions is revealed through the relationship of variations to tonal patterns that were introduced in previous variations (i.e. tonal patterns in variation 8 compared to variations 4–6).

Finally, the inclusion of first movement material in a last movement supports a cyclic dimension in the work that could not be justified had every variation stemmed directly from the original theme. The idea that the variations portray through a cyclic return at the end necessitates an understanding that the general essence of the theme departed, in this case, through logical discourse and development, in the middle. Consequently, the finale movement of Brahms's Op. 67 String Quartet in B-flat major provides unity to the entire work through teleological development of the theme and cyclical allusion.

## Chapter 7: Variation and Fantasy: Brahms's Quintet in G major, Op. 111

*I would wish people would distinguish between the title Variations and something else, possibly Fantasy-variations, or however we would otherwise want to call almost all the newer variation works. I have a singular affection for the variation form, and believe that this form still compels our talents and ability. Beethoven treats it [with such] extraordinarily severity, he can even justly translate [the title variations as]: alterations [Veränderungen]. What comes after him, by Schumann, H[erzogenberg], or Nottebohm, is something else. I have, of course, as little against the method as against the music. But I wish people would also distinguish by name what is different in the method.<sup>1</sup>*

—Johannes Brahms, 1876, in a letter to Heinrich von Herzogenberg

In his 1876 letter to his close friend Herzogenberg, Brahms assumes a polemical stand against the newer, nineteenth-century method of variation. This type of variation generally departed from the basic structure of a theme while retaining motivic or thematic material. As seen in the theme and variation movements discussed previously (op. 18/ii, op. 36/iii, and op. 67/iv), the idea of retaining structural elements is paramount in Brahms's approach to variation. In Op. 18, he grounded the structure through the *folia* harmonic progression and principles of the passacaglia, and in Op. 36, a basic harmonic framework provided foundation for an ever-changing polyphonic texture. Finally, in Op. 67, Brahms approached the theme through teleological development while still acknowledging the original content and achieving unity between the movement and the entire work. In Op. 111, however, Brahms pursues a new method of variation, the very technique he had decried 14 years earlier: the fantasy variation.

Brahms's String Quintet in G major, op. 111, was composed in 1890, a year in which Brahms expressed thoughts of retiring from his compositional career.<sup>2</sup> The second movement, an Adagio, is conceived in a theme and variation form, carrying many features of the nineteenth-century fantasy variation. But why would Brahms write a fantasy variation when his writings declare that he viewed this technique with such little admiration? Elaine Sisman offers the observation that "Brahms the composer never actively repudiated any of the variation techniques that Brahms the critic seemed to deplore."<sup>3</sup> Yet even if his music is not always in agreement with his writings, how does he reconcile the "fantasy" genre,

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<sup>1</sup>Brahms, *Briefwechsel*, vol. I, (20 August 1876), translated and quoted by Sisman, "Brahms and the Variation Canon," p. 135.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Gal. *Johannes Brahms: His Work and Personality*, trans. by Joseph Stein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 223–24. Brahms later reassumed the compositional craft upon discovering a new inspiration in writing chamber music for clarinet. After meeting clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, he began exploring the variety of textures and sounds available to the instrument.

<sup>3</sup>Sisman, "Brahms and the Variation Canon," p. 153.

in which “improvisation...[takes] precedence over any particular formal pattern,”<sup>4</sup> with the structural unity that is inherent in his language of variation? Does he simply allude to fantasy techniques within a strict design as in Op. 36? Or is Op. 111 different, diverging from formal continuity and embracing the method of the fantasy? What aspects of the structure remain?

These questions will guide the following analysis in understanding the composer’s language and technique of variation in his Op. 111 Adagio. Implications of the fantasy variation will be explored, followed by an account of the theme and the formal and harmonic foundations of the movement. Finally, the variations will be studied according to their development and digression from the theme, with the goal of assimilating this movement, one of his last variation works, into a narrative that describes the breadth of his approach to theme and variation.

## I. THE FANTASY VARIATION

The term *fantasy variation* was the phrase that Brahms applied to variations in the newer style, a style indicative of significant departures of the structural basis of the theme while reiterating basic thematic melodies or motives.<sup>5</sup> The terminology available in describing this process of variation also includes *fantasia variations*, *amplifying variations*, *free variations*, and *large*, or *higher variations*.<sup>6</sup> Timothy Jones describes *fantasia variations* as a variation form “in which all parameters can be subjected to radical change though a narrative structure may shape the work.”<sup>7</sup> As examples, he cites Strauss’s *Don Quixote* (1896–97) and Elgar’s “Enigma” Variations (1898–99), works both written near the end of the nineteenth century and after Brahms’s Op. 111 Quintet. The stylistic components of the Elgar and Strauss variations will be briefly examined below for a clearer understanding of the expectations of this late nineteenth-century genre, but first a review of the scholarship on *free variation*, or *fantasy variation*.

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<sup>4</sup>Edward Laufer, “On the Fantasy,” *Intégral 2* (1988): p. 99.

<sup>5</sup>Sisman, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*.

<sup>6</sup>Nelson, *The Technique of Variation: A Study of the Instrumental Variation from Antonio de Cabézon to Max Reger*, p. 24, and Jones, “variation form,” in *Oxford Companion to Music*, *Oxford Music Online*.

<sup>7</sup>Timothy Jones, “variation form,” *Oxford Music Online*.

Other titles have been used in referring to *fantasias*, and often genres such as sonata or symphony are combined with term *fantasy* to further describe a work, such as *sonata-fantasy* or *symphonic fantasia*.<sup>8</sup> Genres such as capriccio, rhapsody, and fantasy-piece are further examples of names given to pieces that approach an improvisatory style with a lack of formal continuity.<sup>9</sup> The combination of the terms, variation and fantasy, however, stems from writings in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Whereas the former term implies a specific and recurring structure, the latter suggests a piece devoid of formal intent, which primarily relies of the technique of improvisation on the composer's part. The juncture of these two styles advances the prospect of reconciling two disparate stylistic features within the same work. Composer and member of the Schumann circle, Julius Schäffer, offered a nineteenth-century perspective on the fantasy variation in 1860:

In the third category, the centre of gravity lies neither in the theme alone nor in the variations alone, but rather in the psychological bond between the two. ...The individual variations will have to manifest a connection with the theme as well as with each other ...; in other respects, however, they will come into the world bringing with them their newborn motifs and new developmental laws, thus [each] to expand into autonomous art forms—often even as related movement is not directly derived from the theme [but] like “intermezzi” draw into their own realm. Just as the variation form in this genre achieves its highest significance, it reaches at the same time its outermost limits, striving to overcome them and to pass into the sphere of the free fantasy. It appears not inappropriate to give them the name Fantasy-Variation.<sup>10</sup>

Robert Schumann expressed similar views in suggesting that the fantasy was a superior level of exploring variation technique, and a necessary process in moving forward in the genre.<sup>11</sup>

What inherent properties distinguish variation from fantasy, and how are the two combined to function collectively within a single movement or work? Mark Evan Bonds differentiates between an elaborative treatment of the theme and one of *inventio*, the composer's process of continually inventing new themes or motives.<sup>12</sup> For Bonds, there are two main types of musical form: free and elaborative, and these forms are “based at least in part on a distinction between genres, and as such touches on the crucial

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<sup>8</sup>Catherine Coppola, “The Elusive Fantasy: Genre, Form and Program in Tchaikovsky's ‘Francesca da Rimini,’” *19th-Century Music* 22/2 (Autumn 1998): p. 180.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted by Sisman, “Variations,” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, from *Echo*, x, 1860, p. 95; quoted in G. Puchelt, *Variationen für Klavier im 19. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt, 1973), pp. 142–3.

<sup>11</sup>See Sisman, *Haydn and the Classical Variation*, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup>Bonds, *Wordless Rhetoric: Musical Form and the Metaphor of the Oration*, p. 115.

link between genre and form.”<sup>13</sup> The fantasia is a product of the free, *inventio* process, and on the other hand, theme and variation (as well as sonata form and rondo form) features the elaborative process.<sup>14</sup> Since the free and elaborative forms appear here to be discrete approaches to compositional style, the union of the two, through a fantasy variation, must suggest a blending of both free and strict approaches.

In the prior variation movements studied in his chamber works for strings, one could assume that for Brahms, *strictness* denotes faithfulness to the original content or broad structure of the theme. Julian Rushton provides a specific example of the meaning of strict treatment of the theme, as applied to the composer’s *Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn*, op. 56a (1873):

Brahms’s variations are strict, although the theme as melody is scarcely heard again before its apotheosis in the finale. Strictness resides in the derivation of the structure of every variation from the proportions and melodic and harmonic outline of the theme, as if Brahms stripped his source to its essence, using its structure as a template for variations worked out with absolute rigour; their freedom (diversity of texture, colour, tempo, metre) is controlled by close, albeit variable, degrees of adherence to the melody and bass of the theme, and by almost total obedience to its periodic structure...<sup>15</sup>

It appears that Brahms’s signature style is to achieve unity by retaining the structure of the theme, even when he shapes new melodies and motives through the technique of developing variation. But Robert Nelson identifies the most salient characteristic of the free variation as “escaping the structural control of the theme,” and embodying the antithesis of a structurally based variation.<sup>16</sup> He also identifies the advantages of this type of variation:

This innovation gains for it two definite advantages: the avoidance of the monotony engendered by a constantly repeated structural pattern, and the opportunity to secure an untrammelled development of the theme material.<sup>17</sup>

Brahms’s typical adherence to the structure of his theme must therefore be studied carefully in light of the fantasy aspects that Elaine Sisman contends are evident in his G-major String Quintet (op. 111).<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the variations of Elgar and Strauss reveal the later tendencies of the fantasy variation, following Brahms’s compositional influence in the genre. The subtitle of Strauss’s *Don Quixote* is

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 118.

<sup>15</sup>Rushton, *Elgar: “Enigma” Variations*, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup>Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, pp. 24, 119.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, p. 120.

<sup>18</sup>See Sisman, “Brahms and the Variation Canon,” pp. 152–3.

*Fantastische Variationen über ein Thema ritterlichen Charakters*, or, *Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character*. Bound by a programmatic concept, Rushton describes Strauss's variations as "indubitable free, capriccios on a bundle of characteristic motives."<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Elgar's "Enigma" Variations are joined through a programmatic theme. Rushton similarly comments on the coherence of these variations, concluding that "[Elgar] links his variations not by underlying phraseology or harmony, but by open adherence to the theme as melody."<sup>20</sup> This idea of motivic retention, with the "abandonment of the structure of theme,"<sup>21</sup> appears as a common trait in the realm of the fantasy variation, spanning from the mid- to late-nineteenth century. The Adagio from Brahms's Op. 111 Quintet (1890), thus resides historically in the latter context of the genre.

These aspects of the fantasy variation will be considered in the following discussion regarding the components of the theme and the formal and harmonic design of the movement. The Adagio does indeed carry a formal design, despite its fantasy-like characteristics. The variations will then be studied in regard to their coherence and/or divergence from the theme, seeking to understand how Brahms creates a fantasy variation in light of his views on structure and variation.

## II. COMPONENTS OF THE THEME

Understanding the various components of the theme is necessary before assessing what parts of the theme recur and what parts are significantly altered in the ensuing variations. The theme consists of three parts: (1) an eight-measure melodic statement in the first viola (theme), (2) a four-measure transition, and (3) a two-measure cadenza figure, once again, in the first viola.<sup>22</sup> These parts are distinguished through melody and texture, and they flow seamlessly from one to another within the first fourteen measures of

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<sup>19</sup>Rushton, *Elgar "Enigma" Variations*, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup>Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, p. 120.

<sup>22</sup>These three parts are not demarcated on the score through double bar lines or rests, but rather, I have chosen them based on their distinct thematic and textural properties. The melodic viola solo is accompanied through a light contrapuntal texture, a violin duet shapes the transition, and lastly, the cadenza in the theme features virtuosic ornamentation by a single soloist, the first violist.

the movement. Through their textures and melodic contours, each of these parts can be perceived as a *signposts* for the theme, setting a standard of reference in comparing the variations to follow.

### *Melodic Statement of the Theme*

The basic melody in the theme is introduced by the viola, bearing a lyrical, and somewhat improvisatory character (SEE EXAMPLE 7.1). Set in D minor, the chromaticism, extensive ornamentation, and pitch-centricity on E reveal an improvisatory tone from its initial statement. The melodic contour rises into measure 4 and slowly falls back down. The other four voices accompany the theme lightly through a contrapuntal texture.

**EXAMPLE 7.1:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, theme (melodic statement), mm. 1–8, viola 1



Concerning harmonic progression, there is a goal oriented motion leading from the tonic to the dominant, emphasizing the flat-VII and flat-III harmonies (SEE FIGURE 7.1). The initial melodic tune in measures 1 and 2 will be referred to as the “head motive” of the theme, since it recurs consistently at the beginning of each variation. The transition then follows, prolonging the dominant harmony.

**FIGURE 7.1:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, mm. 1–14, Harmonic progression in theme

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Theme								Transition				Cadenza (A melodic minor)	
Head Motive													
i	V	i	V	VII	III	VII		V/V	V	V7		V/V	
D minor													

### *Transition and Cadenza*

Serving primarily in a role of prolongation, the transition sustains the A major harmony with a rhythmic duet in the violins based on thirds and sixths (SEE EXAMPLE 7.2). In terms of rhythm, the thirty-



second note preceding each eighth note is a varied construction of the dotted rhythms in the head motive in measure 1.

**EXAMPLE 7.2:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, theme (transition), mm. 9–12, violins



A virtuosic figure in the viola closes the theme with continuous triplets and ties, again, suggesting a free, improvisatory quality (SEE EXAMPLE 7.3). With F-sharps and G-sharps, the cadenza is based on an A melodic minor scale. Variation 1 begins in measure 15, back in D minor. An elision results as the cadenza from the theme ends with a descending stepwise motion in the bass (F–E–D) simultaneously as the new head motive signals the first variation. By ending on a V/V at the end of measure 14, and resolving to D minor at the beginning of variation 1, the theme is harmonically open, encouraging a continuous interpretation between variations. Recall also that the melodic statement of the theme ended with a half cadence in measure 8.

**EXAMPLE 7.3:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, theme (cadenza), mm. 13–14, viola 1



Many of these three textural components of the theme are capable of being traced within the movement. The basic shapes of these thematic fragments are retained, though in varied form, just as in the typical fantasy variation. As discussed above, however, thematic structure is often discontinued in favor of a new improvisatory, fantasy-like development of the theme. An analysis of the broad formal and harmonic scheme will reveal the moments in which Brahms stretches the boundaries of his structure and the instances in which he digresses from the original framework of the theme.

### III. FORMAL AND HARMONIC SCHEME

On a visual level, one of the most immediately apparent features of the formal structure in the Op. 111 Adagio is the absence of double bar lines or repeat signs to designate the beginnings and endings of the variations. In addition, the harmonic structure of the theme projects a continuous motion into variation 1. The lack of visual indications to sectionalize the variations therefore supports the idea of a continuous variation that is not bound by traditional formal principles. There are, however, other ways that Brahms indicates the beginnings and endings of major sections. For example, he uses the two-measure head motive from the theme to open each variation. At times, those two measures appear as the only resemblance to the theme, since the melody quickly turns in new directions in the subsequent phrases. Nevertheless, these melodic fragments take precedence over the structure of the theme as the aural indicators that a new variation has begun.

The close of each variation also portrays a familiar signpost from the theme as a recurrent, improvisatory cadenza. As the variations develop, the cadenza is not instrument-specific, but rather, based on the motivic character and contour introduced initially by the first viola. Several instruments sometimes share the figuration, and it is lengthened and abbreviated according to the variation, but its function remains the same as its role in the theme. It closes each variation and transitions into the next, often by means of elision. These two signposts, the head motive and the cadenza, signal the structural beginnings and endings of each variation, respectively. Brahms retains motivic figures from the theme as a technique of recurrence that achieves continuity throughout the movement.

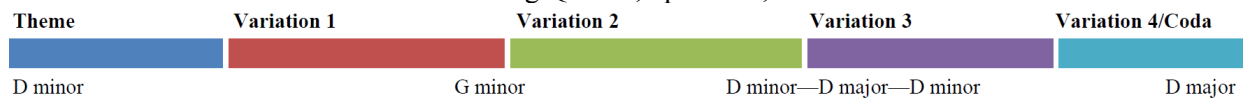
With melodic motives as signs to guide the listener in understanding the formal sections for the theme and variation, periodic and harmonic structure assume a secondary role to the recurrent motivic devices. Despite the fantasy-like characteristics of this variation, however, the harmonic aspects of the theme are not entirely abandoned, and consequently, a thorough study shows that the periodic structure bears a faint imprint in the successive variations.

***Formal and Periodic Structure***

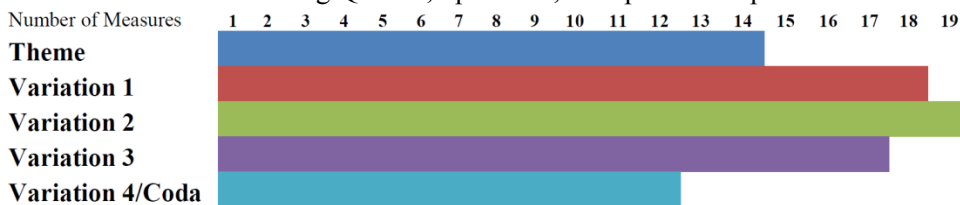
Consisting of a theme with three variations and a coda, this theme and variation movement is much shorter compared to some of the other movements for chamber strings in this study. The theme begins in D minor, briefly exploring G minor during variation 2, and vacillating between D minor and D major in variation 3 to the coda (SEE FIGURE 7.2). The alternation of major and minor keys has been well-noted in the previous works (opp. 18 and 36), in addition to ending a minor-key variation in its parallel major (see measure 80).

In terms of periodicity, Brahms has abandoned his customary proportions of modeling the structure and the length of each variation from the theme. As a result, no section within the movement shares the same length, suggesting that each bears an individual structure, whether closely resembling the theme or not (SEE TABLE 7.1). The extended length in each of the variations reflects an organic process that transcends formal boundaries. Whether caused by extensions to the original structure or extensive re-workings of the structure, the formal design is ultimately altered through each variation, supporting the idea of the progressive, fantasy-like variation.

**FIGURE 7.2:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, Broad formal scheme



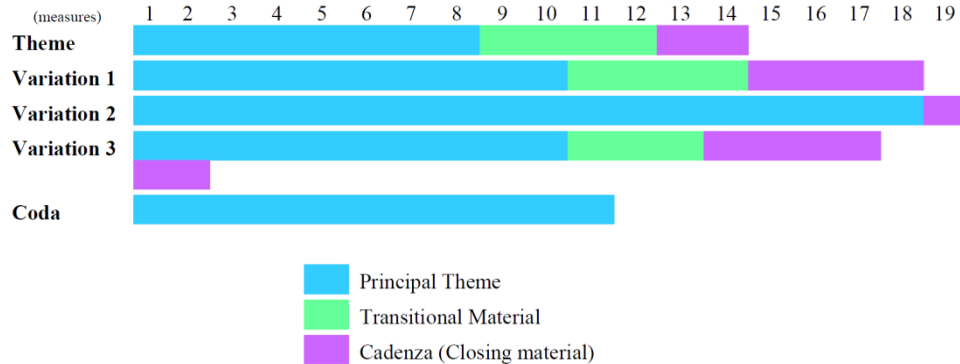
**TABLE 7.1:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, Comparison of periodic structure



A closer look into the three sections of the theme (melodic theme, transition, and cadenza) reveals exactly how these variations are extended (SEE TABLE 7.2). For example, variation 1 is lengthened through an extended theme and a cadenza that is twice as long as the original. Variation 2 appears to lack any transitional material with an extensive out-working of the theme. The cadenza in variation 2 is quite

shortened, and in fact, it overlaps into the thematic material of variation 3. Beginning with formal ambiguity in variation 3, Brahms superimposes both opening and closing material within the first two bars. The rest of variation 3 appears similar in periodicity to variation 1, yet still possessing a unique length and structure. Finally, the coda is based on reiterations of the head motive.

**TABLE 7.2:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, Varying degrees of theme, transition, and cadenza



These structural differences represent the motivic material and the different periodicities of the variations. Harmonic motion also underlies the thematic content, thus imparting another level of structural continuity to the work.

### ***Broad Harmonic Scheme***

As shown in FIGURE 7.1, the theme presents a basic harmonic progression, and the subsequent variations emulate the theme's structure in varying degrees. Some basic harmonic motions in the theme are generally preserved. For example, each variation remains harmonically open, with continuous movement into the next variation (SEE TABLE 7.3). Furthermore, the progression from tonic to dominant in the melodic statement of the theme recurs through variation 2. Transitions generally serve in prolonging roles, and some are replaced by a chain of sequences, as in variation 2. The cadenza remains as an element of close in each of the variations, although it sometimes confuses its function by overlapping into the head motive, as in variation 3. At last, the coda appears to deviate considerably from the original structure through an emphasis on the relationship between the subdominant and tonic. While

the structure is challenged in variation 1, significant blurring and invention of new structural elements prevail in variations 2 and 3, with a coda that retains only the original head motive from the theme.

From a broad perspective, it does appear that the inherent structure of the theme is partially compromised in favor of creating a new formal design. This illustrates the *inventio* form that Mark Evan Bonds contrasted against elaboration form, the latter being a typical compositional process of theme and variation genres. By departing from the structure, the movement draws upon traits of the fantasia. Brahms does not dismiss the thematic structure immediately, however, and the techniques he uses in shifting from an adherence to structure to a free, improvisatory approach will be discussed below, particularly in terms of how far he dwells in the realm of the fantasy variation.

**TABLE 7.3:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, Broad harmonic scheme

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Variation 1</b>	<b>Variation 2</b>	<b>Variation 3</b>	<b>Variation 4/Coda</b>
<b>mm. 1-14</b>	<b>mm. 15-32</b>	<b>mm. 33-51</b>	<b>mm. 52-68</b>	<b>mm. 69-80</b>
14 measures	18 measures	19 measures	17 measures	12 measures
<b>D minor</b>	<b>D minor—G minor</b>	<b>G minor—D minor</b>	<b>D major—D minor</b>	<b>D minor—D major</b>
m.8 d: V _____ trans. V/V cadenza	m. 24 d: V _____ ext. trans. g: Ger6 cadenza	m. 40 g: V _____ ...sequences... d: V7 cadenza	m.61 mm. 62-68 D: I VI V7 _____ trans. A pedal cadenza	m. 74 m.77 d: V7 iv 6/4 D: I

#### IV. TRANSFORMATION OF THEMATIC STRUCTURE THROUGH VARIATION

Variation technique can be applied to produce a number of different results, ranging from mere embellishment to a continuously developing motivic transformation. Transforming the structure in a theme and variation alters much more than the content of melody—it changes the way each unit of variation is perceived, and subsequently, the entire design of the movement. The treatment in the Op. 111 Adagio contrasts from the Op. 67 finale by a structural transformation in the former rather than a constant teleological development of the thematic material as portrayed in the latter. Structure is based on the inner workings of a theme, such as formal periodicity, harmonic progression, and the motion of the bass. Melodic content and motivic material form the outer components of the theme. Thematic statements can be developed significantly while maintaining the structure of the theme, but a change in the foundational

structure will surely result in some alterations of the melody. Yet in terms of basic melodic figures, the structure of the theme can be transformed while leaving these brief motives intact.

Through the continuous development of his structure, Brahms retains a head motive at the beginning of each variation. The head motive recurs as transpositions, according to the key of the variation. This short motive provides the primary continuity for the movement, whereas it is usually the bass or the harmonic structure that conveys unity in Brahms's theme and variations. With a melodic fragment as the cohesive element, Brahms then approaches the transformation of his structure progressively, by (1) stretching boundaries in variation 1, by (2) expanding and abandoning the original structure in variations 2 and 3, respectively, and finally, by (3) establishing a new formal design in the coda.

#### ***Variation 1: Stretching Boundaries***

In the first variation, Brahms stretches the boundaries of the original structure of the theme. The melodic statement of the theme lasts two measures longer, with an internal extension that lengthens the melody (SEE EXAMPLE 7.4 AND FIGURE 7.3). The basic harmonic progression in the original theme begins with the head motive (i-V-i-V) and subsequently moves to the dominant in the next six measures (VII-III-VII-V/V-V) (SEE FIGURE 7.1). Here in variation 1, the progression is very similar, but there is not a simple way to extract the added harmonies and return to the original structure. For example, the addition of subdominant harmonies in measures 19 and 23 are embedded within the texture of the piece. Removing those measures would weaken the movement to the dominant. Likewise, the strong V/V harmony in measure 20 only hints at the minor dominant and moves steadily back to VII in measure 21.

Using the analytical technique of re-composition, the only feasible possibility in reducing the extended length of this variation would involve removing measures 18 to 20 (SEE EXAMPLE 7.5). But this solution avoids the rich harmonic intricacies, and furthermore, its periodicity bears no relationship to the theme. Since a successful re-composition is not conceivable, this demonstrates the complexity of the internal changes to the structure. Brahms thus alters the internal structure in variation 1, by stretching boundaries and redesigning the harmonic progression of the theme.

EXAMPLE 7.4: Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, variation 1, mm. 15–24

d: i V i V VII IV i<sup>6</sup> V/V VII V7 III IV V

FIGURE 7.3: Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, mm. 15–32, Harmonic progression in variation 1

15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	
Theme										Transition			Cadenza					
Head Motive													(d minor)—(E-flat major)					
i	V	i	V	VII	IV	V/V	VII	III	IV	V	V7	V7/iv	iv	V	V	N6		
D minor														g: VI				Ger6

EXAMPLE 7.5: Recomposition of Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, variation 1, mm. 15ff.

d: i V i V VII V7 III IV V

While the transition in variation 1 is analogous to its initial appearance in the theme, the cadenza expands from an improvisatory solo for the first viola (theme) to a trio involving violin, viola, and cello (SEE EXAMPLE 7.6). The gesture remains free and virtuosic, leading to a German-sixth chord in G minor, the new key in variation 2. This recurring cadenza-like figure demonstrates the essence of a fantasy-variation: wandering and modulating motives appearing to defy any structural premise. Despite this free motivic development of the theme, the underlying structure has not been loosened entirely. Brahms still adheres to the formal design of the theme in many respects, as portrayed by maintaining the three distinct parts of the theme and a comparable harmonic scheme. On the other hand, he stretches and pulls the

boundaries through internal expansion and freer treatments of the cadenza motive. Only small hints of structural transformation appear in variation 1, foreshadowing the more extensive changes in variations 2 and 3.

**EXAMPLE 7.6:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, variation 1, mm. 29–32

### *Variations 2 and 3: Expansion and Digression*

In variations 2 and 3, structural transformation is achieved through two different means: first through expansion by the sequential technique, and then by digression through the invention of a new structure. Just as developing variation stems from the continuous development of a germinal motive, Brahms alters structure through ongoing changes to harmony, bass movement, and periodicity.

Even though internal structural variation was a prime element of variation 1, the first eight measures in variation 2 can be easily traced back to the theme as a transposition in G minor (SEE FIGURE 7.4). The next ten measures, however, are much more ambiguous, with sequences drawing from material in the last two measures of the theme. The sequences ultimately lead back to D minor, in measure 48, but they also expand the motivic material by considerably altering the theme's periodic structure. For instance, the second variation is devoid of any resemblance of a transition prolonging the dominant, or even of the transition's thematic material. Furthermore, the cadenza is barely apparent, found only in the last bar of the variation, and continuing into variation 3 (SEE EXAMPLE 7.7; CADENZA IN BLUE). As



mentioned previously, the overlap of the cadenza subsequently blurs the flow of one variation to the next, despite the already extended structure in the latter half of variation 2.

FIGURE 7.4: Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, mm. 33–51, Harmonic progression in variation 2

33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51		
Theme																		Cad.		
Head Motive				Sequence										Sequence				Cad.		
i	V	i	V	VII	III	VII	v/v	v	iv	ii°	III	V	I	f	b°	B7	C	i	III	V7
G minor																		d:		
												vii°7								

EXAMPLE 7.7: Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, cadenza between variations 2 and 3, mm. 50–54

Variation 2 is the longest of all of the variations, and prior to the cadenza, it is lengthened through sequences that alternate between homorhythmic and contrapuntal textures (SEE EXAMPLE 7.8). The basic theme closes in measure 40 on a half cadence, but the dominant harmony then serves to propel the motion forward through sequence. One of the salient features of this theme and variation is the open harmonic structures of the theme and the continuous overlap of phrases and sections. This supports an ever changing foundation, as well as fantasy-like figures that modulate and move successfully from one idea to the next.

The sequences derive their material from the tail of the theme, in measures 39 and 40. Alternations of texture supply rapid contrasts of character, all while the composer is achieving yet another transformed harmonic structure, this time leading back to D minor. The second variation, therefore, is characteristic for its extensions through sequence based on thematic material, contrasts of character, and

exotic harmonies that eventually lead back to D minor. This climatic return to D minor is emphasized by *forte* in all of the instruments. The original four-bar transition prolonging the dominant dissolves into the texture of motivic fantasy, and the cadenza appears at the last moment to transition into variation 3.

**EXAMPLE 7.8:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, mm. 39–48

End of Theme |  
| Beginning of Sequences

g:                      VII    V/V V                      d:    vii°7    i

Rhythmic diminutions increase in the third and final variation, providing a distant reminder of the Baroque roots of theme and variation. Beginning in D major, variation 3 forges another transformed structure, more distantly related to the theme than the preceding variations. Motivic content from the theme and the resulting variations combines in variation 3 to shape a new harmonic progression. The first violin and the cello form the outline of harmony and structure (SEE EXAMPLE 7.9). After a statement of the head motive (mm. 52, 53) and an allusion to variation 1 (mm. 54, 55), the first violin reiterates the motives from measures 3–6 of the theme. In fact, the violin melody could be studied as Schenker’s *Urlinie* moving from  $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}$  in measures 58–61. An embellished transition interrupts the descent to the tonic (mm. 62–64), and the final cadenza in the first viola resolves the descent to D ( $\hat{1}$ ) in measure 69, though displaced by two octaves.

The harmonic motion in variation 3 is quite different from the progression in the theme (i–V–i–V–VII–III–VII–V/V–V). Here, the melodic statement ends on VI rather than V, and the previous

harmonies show little congruence to the theme (SEE FIGURE 7.5). The transition and the cadenza prolong the dominant, and in terms of periodicity, Brahms has returned to a structure partially analogous with variation 1. His harmonic background may have changed throughout each variation, but he does not forsake his formal principles entirely. The *Urlinie* in the first violin is one specific indication of the goal-oriented, teleological development that he relentlessly pursues, despite wandering motives, improvisatory themes, and continuous transformation of the structure. Variation 3 thus releases the theme from its structure, while still conveying an imprint of the theme's periodic organization. With the theme freed from past conceptions, the coda finally expands the structural transformation to a new level, departing from previous standards and inventing a new design.

EXAMPLE 7.9: Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, variation 3, mm. 52–61, violin 1 and cello

FIGURE 7.5: Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, mm. 52–68, Harmonic progression in variation 3

52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68
Theme										Transition		Cadenza (d minor/chromatic)				
Head Motive																
Cadenza (A major)																
i (V)	i (V)	vi	iv	i	iv <sup>7</sup>	i	ii <sup>6</sup>	i	V <sup>7</sup> /V <sup>1</sup>	V <sup>1</sup>	i	iv	V			
D major		D minor								A pedal (D minor)						

### The Coda: A New Structure

As a final transformation of the thematic structure, the coda retains the head motive from the theme in both D minor (mm. 69, 70) and G minor (mm. 77, 78), but abandons the theme for chromaticism

instead (SEE EXAMPLE 7.10). The bass line in measures 72–75 ascends chromatically from F to A, with octave displacement, and eventually resolves to a D pedal-tone until the end of the movement. Above the pedal, the harmonies fluctuate from the subdominant to the major tonic, ending in a plagal cadence (SEE FIGURE 7.6). There are no signs of periodicity, and the only remnant from the theme is the recurring head motive.

**EXAMPLE 7.10:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, coda, cello, mm. 72–75

72

*dolce* < > *f*

**FIGURE 7.6:** Brahms String Quintet, op. 111/ii, mm. 69–80, Harmonic progression in coda

69	70	71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	
<b>Theme</b>							<b>Closing Material</b>					
<b>Head Motive</b>							<b>Head Motive</b>					
i	V	i	V	Chromatic	V7	V7/iv		(iv 6/4)		I		
<b>D minor</b>							<b>(g minor)</b>					<b>D major</b>

The coda of the Op. 111 Adagio does not contain a partial variation as the preceding movements in the present study. Instead, it embodies the structural transformation that is characteristic of the movement. The relationship between dominant and tonic is weakened since motion to the dominant (m. 74) is concealed by the emphasis on the subdominant. Extreme chromaticism and lack of periodicity further thwart the structure of the theme. Cohesion emerges from motivic connections rather than a structural foundation. Brahms finally explores the true essence of the fantasy variation in the coda, which is possible only because he continuously released the theme of its structural demands throughout each variation. The coda is therefore the composer's concluding reconciliation of variation and fantasy.

## V. A VARIATION STRUCTURE REDEFINED

From the scholarly writings on variation and fantasy, these two genres originate from two separate techniques: one that elaborates a given structure, or theme, and the other that continuously invents. For Brahms, variation technique relies on structural continuity, whereas fantasy implies improvisation and the

absence of formal design. Yet as a composer well-versed in the variation genre, Brahms successfully crafted a fantasy variation while simultaneously upholding his commitment to the structure. His harmonic progressions demonstrate a similar direction to the dominant. Furthermore, when harmony must take secondary role to the melody in terms of organic unity, the melody reflects a goal-oriented motion. In addition, he retains aspects of the original thematic sections and periodicity. Prolonging transitions and fantasy-like cadenzas contrast with the melodic theme throughout the majority of the movement. The structure is expanded, stretched, and at times abandoned, but a faint outline of the theme remains, even when the motivic material assumes the primary role in developing a new type of variation—a variation that does not require strict structural boundaries to portray a unified character.

On the other hand, characteristics of the fantasia are prevalent in the Adagio. The themes Brahms introduces from the beginning are inherently improvisatory. His theme and his variations are harmonically open, not bound by sectional bar lines. Elisions between phrases and sections result from this organic approach. Brahms embraces the new technique by allowing a continuous transformation of thematic structure. Within each successive variation, he frees the structure, allowing the melodic content of the theme to expand and retract, fundamentally re-structuring the theme and its design. In this way, the composer's music redefines his critiques on variation form. Brahms gradually transforms the structure, emphasizing melodic continuity, and yet his inventions in the design of the theme create new variations while retaining the outline of the original, or sometimes a faint reminder of what came before. What separates the Op. 111 Adagio from other fantasy variations is the composer's ability to transform the structure with continuous motion and development, always conscious of relating one variation to another, and consequently, achieving organic unity through uninterrupted invention.

## Chapter 8: Conclusions

A developing story emerges from the study of Brahms's theme and variation movements for chamber strings, providing insights into the progressive journey of his compositional style. Assessing the four movements in comparison to each other reveals changes in Brahms's style which organically grew out of previous developments in his musical language. The alterations in his compositional approach thus form a continuum, in which changes are progressive and dependent on earlier growth. A continuous narrative of Brahms's variation technique ultimately proceeds from this constant development of style.

In drawing conclusions about Brahms's approach to theme and variations in these four movements, it is therefore necessary to adopt a continuous perspective in interpreting his contributions to the variation genre. In his chamber works for strings, the development of his approach to variation technique parallels the concept of developing variation, a compositional trait indicative to his style. In developing variation, the small but successive changes to the thematic motives eventually transform the theme. Likewise, over time, Brahms's formal theme and variation technique undergoes significant transformations through a series of innovations to the form, harmonies, melody, and texture. Each of these smaller modifications contributes to the overall progression of theme and variation, both in the context of Brahms's individual output as well as within the greater variation genre.

The conclusions will address this continual, teleological development of Brahms's style as portrayed through the variation movements in this study. Four analytical perspectives shape the story of Brahms's compositional development: (1) broad perspectives of the variation movements and their respective techniques, (2) evolving techniques in form and structure, (3) juxtaposition of tradition and innovation, and (4) fixed and altered components of the theme. When the present variations are studied on a continuum, these analytical perspectives reveal the developing narrative of Brahms's language of theme and variation as both a unique voice and a contribution to the larger principle of theme and variation.

I. BROAD PERSPECTIVES OF THE VARIATIONS MOVEMENTS AND THEIR RESPECTIVE TECHNIQUES

In Opp. 18, 36, 67, and 111, each of the variation movements reflects a specific variation type and mode of construction. Rooted deeply in the historical tradition, the second movement of the Op. 18 Sextet represents a constant harmony variation derived from the *folia* dance progression. In addition, a loose basso ostinato grounds the structure. Moving into a variation technique indicative of the nineteenth century, the third movement of Op. 36 upholds the structure of a formal-outline variation with a free theme and a polyphonic conception of variation. The finale in Op. 67 is the typical melodic-outline variation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, yet the use of teleological development and organic unity distinguish this movement from more recursive techniques employed in the preceding works. Finally, the Adagio of Op. 111 portrays the characteristics of the fantasy variation through a progressive approach to form (SEE TABLE 8.1).

These movements therefore cover a variety of variation techniques, demonstrating Brahms’s flexibility in the genre. Many of these techniques also point to each respective movement’s structural tendencies and formal design. Whether governed by a continual bass or harmonic progression, a formal periodicity, a melodic line, or the transformation of a theme’s structure, form plays a vital role in determining the respective variation type. Furthermore, within each variation classification, there is a broad spectrum of structural variance. As a result, it is important to delve deeper than merely identifying the movement’s variation type and study its formal principles and the degrees in which the composer stretches conventional boundaries. Through the pushing and pulling of structural norms, Brahms creates a continuous dialogue of formal invention.

**TABLE 8.1:** Variation Types and Characteristics

	<b>Op. 18/ii</b>	<b>Op. 36/iii</b>	<b>Op. 67/iv</b>	<b>Op. 111/ii</b>
<b>Variation Type</b>	Ostinato Constant harmony ( <i>la folia</i> )	Formal-outline	Melodic-outline	Fantasy
<b>Characteristics</b>	Baroque implications	Free theme; polyphonic variation; fantasy-like elements	Organic unity; teleological development of the theme	Progressive transformation of structure

## II. EVOLVING TECHNIQUES IN FORM AND STRUCTURE

In terms of broad structural organization, the variation movements in Opp. 18, 36, and 67 all have divisions between the variations, either through double bar lines or repeat signs. In Op. 111, however, the motion between variations becomes more continuous and organic (SEE FIGURE 8.1). Op. 111 is not the only movement in the study to show signs of progressive development. Instead, it is the result of many smaller innovations that Brahms began practicing in the earlier movements.

For example, the Andante in Op. 18 is the most representative of Baroque styles through constant harmonic repetition portraying the recursive nature of variation technique. The successive diminutions across the variations are also reminiscent of past practices. Brahms frees the strict succession of rhythmic intensity, however, in variation 4, allowing for an organic, nineteenth-century language to emerge and reconcile with the earlier Baroque structure. The overlap in phrases between the final variation and the coda is another instance of loosening the structure of the work. Eight-bar phrases follow regularly, one after another, until the last bar of the final variation is interpreted as the first bar of the next phrase.

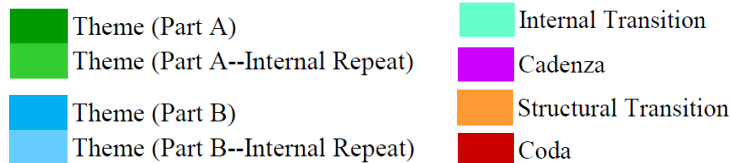
The polyphonic variation in Op. 36 portrays other aspects of structural change. Also consisting of regular phrases, a five-bar structural transition expands the typical periodicity of the movement's formal outline. Changes of tempo also affect the listener's perception, as in variation 5. Cast as an Adagio, it is considerably longer than any of the other variations. Furthermore, the concept of a free, polyphonic theme increases the textural possibilities.

Tempo changes also characterize the finale of Op. 67, and while the melodic-outline, or ornamental variation technique was already a technique well-trodden by Brahms's predecessors, his approach to form in this variation parallels his teleological development of the theme. He provides a motivic unity to the entire work, and he also explores closely related keys beyond the parallel major and minor. In this way, the variations in Op. 67 become more discursive, and goal-directed, demonstrating an organic motion that departs from the home key and eventually returns. The coda in the Op. 67 finale is perhaps the greatest expansion of structure, lengthened tremendously through the continuous development of the theme's melody. A mixture of melodic inversions, stretto, and pedal tones emerge to transform the



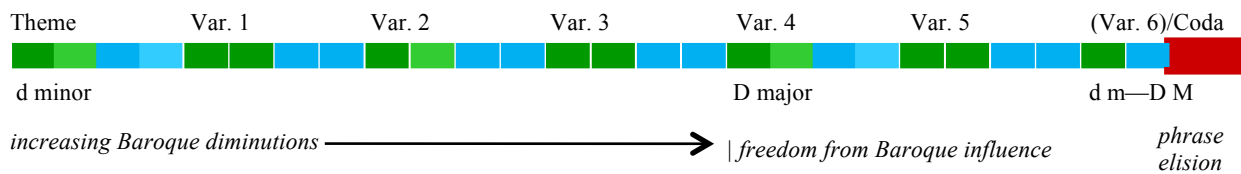
**FIGURE 8.1:** Comparison of formal diagrams

**Key:**

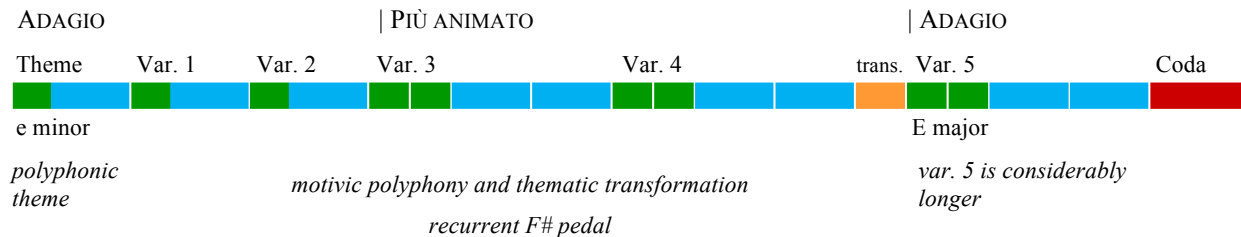


**Op. 18/ii** (159 measures)

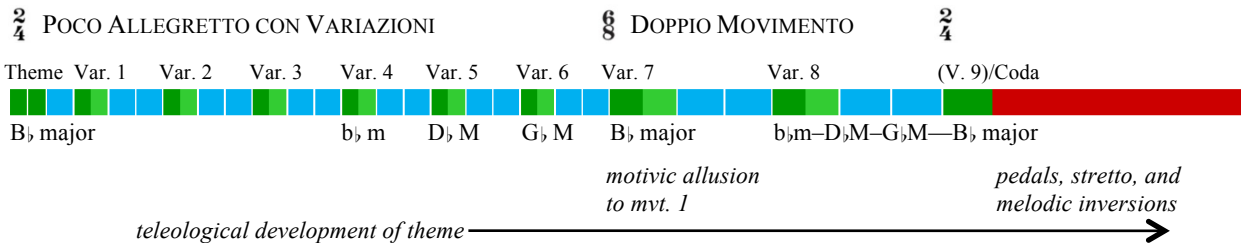
ANDANTE



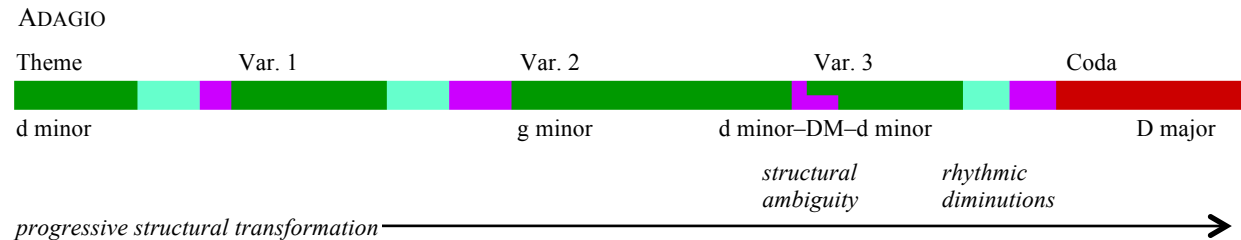
**Op. 36/iii** (87 measures)



**Op. 67/iv** (224 measures)



**Op. 111/ii** (80 measures)



theme and simultaneously juxtapose motivic ideas from both the first movement and the finale. The extended coda emerges from the previous innovative techniques evidenced in Brahms's approach to structure, such as phrase elisions, interruptions to periodicity, and a gradual loosening of the strict formal design. In addition, this significant expansion in the movement's structure provides foundation for deeper alterations in form, as illustrated in the Op. 111 Adagio.

Remaining in a single tempo throughout the entirety of the movement, the Op. 111 Adagio lacks the tempo changes that provided structural variety in Op. 36/ii and Op. 67/iv. Formal development in Op. 111, however, is continuous and not contingent on outward organization. Instead, its transformation of structure is an internal phenomenon in which Brahms progressively alters interior elements of the theme such as harmony, periodicity, and phrase structure. Structural ambiguity occurs through the blurring of variation divisions, and the structure continuously evolves against the background of a recurring thematic motive. Like Op. 67/iv, the Op. 111 Adagio explores harmonies outside of the parallel major and minor relationships, as in the g minor variation in the middle of the movement.

Brahms frees the structure in Op. 111/ii considerably by continually releasing the strict formal expectations of historical variation form. Here, the individual variations each chart a unique course of structural development, respectively, ultimately resulting in a transformed structure, due to the continuous, albeit gradual, developments in each variation. This flexible approach to form grows out of the increasing freedom that Brahms achieved in the previous variation movements. On the other hand, when Brahms allows the fantasy technique to influence his variation of a theme, the structure is released from strict form by degrees, enabling the theme's entire content to influence the new design. While pressing forward through innovation, he still manages to affirm certain conventions of the past, embedding his works into the larger tradition of theme and variation. This recurring juxtaposition of tradition and innovation further enriches the narrative of Brahms's compositional practice.

TABLE 8.2: Tradition versus Innovation in the Variation Movements

		Tradition	Innovation
Op. 18/ii	Melody	Baroque theme	
	Form	Regular 8-bar phrases	Elision between phrases at coda; Release of Baroque idiom in var. 5 to end
	Harmony	Modal mixture (d minor/D major); <i>la folia</i> harmony; passacaglia	
	Rhythm	Increasing diminutions through var. 3	Progressive diminutions end in var. 4
Op. 36/iii	Melody	Fugato; Imitation techniques	Polyphonic conception of theme
	Form	Regular 4+8 bar phrases	Transition; Var. 5 is significantly longer (structural alteration)
	Harmony	Modal mixture (e minor/E major) Regular pedal	Similar harmonic structures (formal-outline)
	Rhythm		Change of tempos
Op. 67/iv	Melody	Melodic embellishment	Teleological development of the theme; Cyclical unity
	Form	Regular 4+8 bar phrases in var. 1–6	Extended coda; Lengthened var. 7 & 8
	Harmony		Use of closely related keys outside of the parallel major/minor; Contrasts of harmony
	Rhythm		Change of tempos; Change of meters
Op. 111/ii	Melody	General clarity of variation beginnings	Recurring head motive structures variations
	Form		Irregular lengths of variations; Transformation of structure
	Harmony		Use of closely related keys outside of the parallel major/minor; Chromaticism
	Rhythm	Baroque diminutions in var. 3	

### III. THE JUXTAPOSITION OF TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Tradition and innovation might appear to be in direct opposition to one another, but for Brahms, his unique compositional language develops from the juxtaposition of these characteristics. No Brahms piece or movement is fully traditional or completely innovative. Rather, elements of both tradition and innovation work together as both a collective whole and in contrast to one another. TABLE 8.2 organizes the conventional and progressive traits of the movements according to four aspects of the theme: (1) melody, (2) form, (3) harmony, and (4) rhythm. Many of these characteristics have been previously introduced and discussed. Overall, elements of tradition and recursion appear primarily in the earlier works, while a more discursive, innovative language functions predominantly in the later works.

The sextets (Op. 18, 36) begin with roots in the historical traditions, and the latter two variation movements (Op. 67, 111) stretch and manipulate the boundaries of conventional form. As shown through TABLE 8.2, the dual presence of both traditional and innovative techniques prohibits a clear categorization of the variation movements in the present study. We can draw broad comparisons, as noted between the sextets and the others, but only through an acknowledgement of the steady process of change demonstrated in his style. Each movement appears as a mere photograph, or frozen image, to record the journey of Brahms's compositional development. These movements, then, contribute effectively to the progressive narrative of Brahms's style when each is interpreted as an individual milestone in his output. After recognizing the complexity of analyzing these works along a continuous narrative, it is now possible to view the developments in these movements through a broader scope, beginning with the fixed and altered components of the theme.

### IV. FIXED AND ALTERED COMPONENTS OF THE THEME

The fixed and altered elements in the theme are typically the defining characteristics in a variation type. Although the variation types of these respective movements have already been presented, it will bring further clarity to specify the exact aspects of the theme that remain fixed and those that undergo change through variation. TABLE 8.3 provides the basic parts of the theme that remain and those

that change, according to the variation movement. Harmony and bass ground the structure in Op. 18/ii, whereas the melody and motivic ideas vary. In Op. 36/iii, the texture and the general formal-outline of the theme provide foundation to the movement, while again, melody and motivic embellishment become the primary variables.

A shift in the relationship of these fixed and altered elements occurs in Op. 67/iv, as the melody moves from a characteristic of alteration to one of continuity. Melodic tones recur throughout the variations in Op. 67/iv, and changes now occur in the harmony and melodic embellishment. In addition, a small degree of structural variance emerges. By Op. 111/ii, only motives from the theme recur while the elements of structure and harmony assume the leading role in thematic digression.

**TABLE 8.3:** Fixed and Altered Elements in the Variation Movements

	<b>Fixed</b>	<b>Altered</b>
<b>Op. 18/ii</b>	Harmony Bass	Melody Motivic ideas
<b>Op. 36/iii</b>	Polyphonic texture General form Recurring harmonic pedal	Melody Motivic embellishment Some harmony
<b>Op. 67/iv</b>	Principal melodic tones	Embellishment of melody Harmony Some structure (extension)
<b>Op. 111/ii</b>	Thematic motives (head motive; cadenza shape)	Structure Harmony

Features such as harmony, bass, and general form all constitute the internal workings of a theme, or the deeper, structural components. On the other hand, melodic tones, thematic motives, and melody represent the outward features, those that are most readily apparent to the listener on a surface level. TABLE 8.4 illustrates the shift that occurs between fixed and altered aspects of the theme. Whereas structural and background components govern the theme and its variations in Op. 18, a gradual shift occurs throughout the other variation movements, eventually prioritizing the melody and thematic motives as the recurring element in the later variation works. The same motion occurs in reverse in regard to the altered aspects of the theme. Brahms's language therefore moves from an invention of melody to a

transformation of structure. In his chamber works for strings, he gradually releases the structure in favor of an adherence to short motivic fragments. This sharpens the focus in analyzing his stylistic development, providing a means to construct a concluding narrative to Brahms's approach to theme and variation as demonstrated in these four variation movements.

**TABLE 8.4:** Continuum Shift in Fixed and Altered Elements

	<b>Op. 18/ii (1860)</b>	<b>Op. 36/iii (1865)</b>	<b>Op. 67/iv (1875)</b>	<b>Op. 111/ii (1890)</b>
<b>Fixed</b>	structural/background components	—————→		melody/motivic ideas
<b>Altered</b>	melody/motivic ideas	—————→		structural/background components

V. A DEVELOPING NARRATIVE: BRAHMS'S LANGUAGE OF THEME AND VARIATION

The developing narrative of Brahms's language of theme and variation emerges out of the dense texture of formal, melodic, and harmonic techniques of variation. Harmonically, Brahms moves from mere modal mixture to an exploration of closely related key areas apart from the parallel major and minor sonorities (SEE TABLE 8.5). In terms of structure, as a composer known for his conventional forms, Brahms incorporates a progressive, formal dialogue within the well-established variation form. As he progressively releases the structure, he enables the creation of something new, a new design in the variation. At the same time, as other composers were dismissing structural conventions in order to forge a

**TABLE 8.5:** Developing Narrative of Brahms's Language of Theme and Variation

<b>Op. 18/ii (1860)</b>	<b>Op. 36/iii (1865)</b>	<b>Op. 67/iv (1875)</b>	<b>Op. 111/ii (1890)</b>
modal mixture (parallel minor/major)	exploration of closely related keys apart from the parallel major/minor		
progressive release of structure			
—————→			
invention of something new at deeper levels			
architectonic	—————→		teleological
recursive	—————→		discursive

new path, Brahms built an identity on stretching the boundaries of conventional forms to develop an individual voice of both tradition and progressivism.

In addition, Brahms's variation technique evolved from a strict, architectonic language into a continuously developing, teleological approach to the theme. By varying not only melodic aspects, but other features such as form, he forged a goal-directed course of constant development, ultimately governed by an organization allowing for structural transformation. His variation rhetoric then became not only recursive, as typical to the genre, but also discursive. Brahms presents a discursive compositional language rich in historical tradition yet constantly challenging the boundaries of theme and variation through an unrelenting and progressive development of the theme.

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## Appendix A: Brahms's Chamber Music for Strings Alone

Opus	Title	Key	Movements			Composed	Published	Premiere Performance	
18	Sextet No. 1	B $\flat$ major	I. Allegro ma non troppo	3/4	B $\flat$ major	sonata-form	1859–1860	1861/1862	Hanover, 20 Oct 1860
			II. Andante, ma moderato	2/4	D minor	theme and variations			
			III. Scherzo. Allegro molto	3/4	F major	ABA			
			IV. Rondo. Poco Allegretto e grazioso	2/4	B $\flat$ major	rondo			
36	Sextet No. 2	G major	I. Allegro non troppo	3/4	G major	sonata-form	1864–1865	1866	Zürich, 20 Nov 1866
			II. Scherzo. Allegro non troppo	2/4; 3/4	G minor	ABA			
			III. Poco Adagio	$\text{♩}$	E minor	theme and variations			
			IV. Poco Allegro	9/8	G major	sonata-form			
51	String Quartet No. 1	C minor	I. Allegro	3/2	C minor	sonata-form	?1865–1873	1873	Vienna, 11 Dec 1873
			II. Romanze. Poco Adagio	3/4	A $\flat$ major	ABA			
			III. Allegretto molto moderato e comodo. Un poco più animato	4/8; 3/4	F minor	ABA			
			IV. Allegro	$\text{♩}$	C minor	sonata form with conflated development and recap			
51	String Quartet No. 2	A minor	I. Allegro non troppo	$\text{♩}$	A minor	sonata-form	?1865–1873	1873	Berlin, 18 Oct 1873
			II. Andante moderato	$\text{♩}$	A major	ABA			
			III. Quasi Minuetto, moderato. Allegretto vivace	3/4	A minor?	ABC			
			IV. Finale. Allegro non assai	3/4	A minor	rondo			
67	String Quartet No. 3	B $\flat$ major	I. Vivace	6/8; 2/4	B $\flat$ major	sonata-form	1875	1876	Berlin, 30 Oct 1876
			II. Andante	$\text{♩}$	F major	ABC			
			III. Agitato (Allegretto non troppo)	3/4	D minor	ABA			
			IV. Poco Allegretto con Variazioni. Doppio movimento	2/4	B $\flat$ major	theme and variations			
88	Quintet No. 1	F major	I. Allegro non troppo ma con brio	$\text{♩}$	F major	sonata-form	1882	1882	Frankfurt, 29 Dec 1882
			II. Grave ed appassionato. Allegretto vivace. Presto	3/4	C $\sharp$ minor; A major				
			III. Allegro energico	3/2	F major	sonata-form with fugal sections			
111	Quintet No. 2	G major	I. Allegro non troppo ma con brio	9/8	G major	sonata-form	1890	1891	Vienna, 11 Nov 1890
			II. Adagio	2/4	D minor	theme and variations			
			III. Un poco Allegretto	3/4	G minor	ABA			
			IV. Vivace ma non troppo presto	2/4	G major	sonata-rondo			

## Appendix B: Brahms's Chamber Music by Opus Number

<b>Opus #</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Key</b>	<b>Composed</b>	<b>Published</b>	<b>Premiere Performance</b>
8	Piano Trio No. 1	B	1853-1854 Rev. 1889	1854 Rev. 1891	Danzig, 13 Oct 1855
<b>18</b>	<b>Sextet No. 1</b>	<b>B-flat</b>	<b>1859-1860</b>	<b>1861/1862</b>	<b>Hanover, 20 Oct 1860</b>
25	Piano Quartet No. 1	g	1861	1863	Hamburg, 16 Nov 1861
26	Piano Quartet No. 2	A	1861	1863	Vienna, 29 Nov 1862
34	Piano Quintet	f	1862	1865	Leipzig, 22 June 1866
<b>36</b>	<b>Sextet No. 2</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>1864-1865</b>	<b>1866</b>	<b>Zürich, 20 Nov 1866</b>
38	Cello Sonata No. 1	e	1862-1865	1866	Leipzig, 14 Jan 1871
40	Trio for Horn, Violin, and Piano	E-flat	1865	1866	Zürich, 28 Nov 1865
51	String Quartet Nos. 1 and 2	c, a	?1865-1873	1873	Vienna, 11 Dec 1873 (no. 1) Berlin, 18 Oct 1873 (no. 2)
60	Piano Quartet No. 3	c	1855-1875	1875	Vienna, 18 Nov 1875
<b>67</b>	<b>String Quartet No. 3</b>	<b>B-flat</b>	<b>1875</b>	<b>1876</b>	<b>Berlin, 30 Oct 1876</b>
78	Violin Sonata No. 1	G	1878-1879	1879	Bonn, 8 Nov 1879
87	Piano Trio No. 2	C	1880-1882	1882	Frankfurt, 28 Dec 1882
88	Quintet No. 1	F	1882	1882	Frankfurt, 29 Dec 1882
99	Cello Sonata No. 2	F	1886	1887	Vienna, 24 Nov 1886
100	Violin Sonata No. 2	A	1886	1887	Vienna, 2 Dec 1886
101	Piano Trio No. 3	c	1886	1887	Budapest, 20 Dec 1886
108	Violin Sonata No. 3	d	1886-1888	1889	Budapest, 21 Dec 1888
<b>111</b>	<b>Quintet No. 2</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>1890</b>	<b>1891</b>	<b>Vienna, 11 Nov 1890</b>
114	Trio for Clarinet/Viola, Violoncello, and Piano	a	1891	1892	Berlin, 12 Dec 1891
115	Quintet for Clarinet/Viola and string quartet	b	1891	1892	Berlin, 12 Dec 1891
120	Two Sonatas for Clarinet/Viola	f, E-flat	1894	1895	Vienna, 11 Jan 1895 (no. 1) Vienna, 8 Jan 1895 (no. 2)
WOO2 Posth.	Scherzo for Violin and Piano (from F.A.E. Sonata)	c	1853	1906	Düsseldorf, 28 Oct 1853
Anh.IV/5	Piano Trio	A		1938	1925
Anh.III/1	<i>Hymne</i> – Trio for 2 violins and doublebass/violoncello	A	1853	1976	Humorous piece for J. Joachim

## Appendix C: Lifetime of Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

	1850	1855	1860	1865	1870	1875	1880	1885	1890	1895	
<b>Places of Residence</b>		Hamburg, Düsseldorf, and Detmold (1854–59)	Hamburg (1859–62)	Vienna (Summers spent elsewhere) (1862–97)							
<b>Professional Engagements</b>	Concert tour with violinist Reményi (1853)		Conductor of women's chorus in Hamburg (1859–62)		Conductor of <i>Wiener Singakademie</i> (1863–64)		Conductor of <i>Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde</i> (1872–75)				
<b>Personal Events</b>	Begins acquiring early books and early music for his library (1848)		Robert Schumann dies (1856)		Library now contains large quantity of early music (1858)		Begins friendships with Joachim and the Schumanns (1853)		Begins friendship with Hans von Bülow (1881)		Compositional depression (1890)
<b>Periodization by Genre</b>			Chamber compositions (1860–65)		Vocal music (1866–72)		Return to Instrumental Music (1873)				
<b>Periodization by Maturity</b>	Early Period (1852–59)		First Maturity (1860–72)			High Maturity (1873–1885)		Late Works (1886–1897)			
<b>String Chamber Work Compositions</b>			Sextet, op. 18 (1859–60)		Sextet, op. 36 (1864–65)		String Quartet No. 3, op. 67 (1875)		String Quintet, op. 88 (1882)		String Quintet, op. 111 (1890)
<b>Other Significant Compositions</b>	Serenade for Strings No. 1, op. 11 (1857–58)				Serenade for Strings No. 2, op. 16 (1858–59)		Symphony No. 1, op. 68 (1862–76)		Variations on a theme by J. Haydn op. 56a (1873)		Symphony No. 2, op. 73 (1877)
							Symphony No. 3, op. 90 (1883)		Symphony No. 4, op. 98 (1884–85)		Clarinet Quintet op. 115 (1891)
											Clarinet Sonatas, op. 120 (1894)



